

SERMON

“Our Civil War”

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January 20, 2019

MLK SUNDAY

The government is shut down again. This time the longest in history over a wall. It is absurd. We are more polarized than ever as a nation. And none of this is new for politics or religion.

It's not new because, if you know history, you know that we are still engaged in an ongoing civil war in America. The war did not end in 1865. And that war, in particular, was a deadly, bloody, violent battle with over 600,000 casualties—imagine that. That's like filling the Ravens' stadium to capacity 8 times (think about that!). I'd like to posit that the war continues today but it is now a mental/spiritual war being fought via the media and social media. In fact, the struggle has always been mental/spiritual warfare. We have been fighting for the soul of this nation for a very long time-- each and every one of us. By my analysis, the Civil War was not the start of the tension, rather our founding fathers get credit when they radically claimed their independence in 1776 from England. Our ancestors boldly stated that “all [men] are created equal by their Creator.” This set in motion a struggle/tension about who is free, who makes the rules and who has

rights. Freedom, access, and opportunity are the buzz words which have led to countless schisms past to present.

Do the math, that's 264 years ago (not very long for a country—we are an infant nation)—264 years ago the founding fathers claimed that America was not a colony but a nation of states that eventually became the United States—originally 13 colonies. While the country gained its freedom, it also inherited the sins of its father/mother nation England. It's important to know that we all inherit the virtues and vices of our predecessors (in the micro and macro). England along with many other European countries had, for over 200 years, engaged in the immoral practice of buying and selling human souls, using them as free labor—using them as an economic tool to grow the nation. It worked—the nation grew... But it failed miserably too...because you cannot hold back the cry for FREEDOM. Freedom means ALL not some. That is the moral struggle today. Do we believe in freedom for all or just freedom for some?

The great inherited sin of our country is “othering” and marginalizing. It is a part of America's DNA and has carried through all the problems we see today. We could fix all that ails us if we, as Dr. King would say, “created a people-oriented society and not a thing oriented society.”

Any of you seen the Hamilton musical—or listened to the soundtrack? It's fantastic! I'm a big fan of the powerful music. Lin Manuel said he chose rap because it's the music of revolution. I love that! I've been listening to the soundtrack over and over for weeks and it's clear to me that when Jefferson and Hamilton were in the 'room making it happen' setting up our financial and political systems, they were not thinking about EVERYONE—the poor, or women or people of color. Those groups were “others”. But I forgive them. They are still great men—flawed like us all; but they too were products of what they inherited. We all are.

By 1833, England abolished slavery and this put immense pressure on young America. We were claiming freedom while at the same time holding millions in chattel slavery. Hypocrisy. Inevitably, civil war erupted over states' rights—but mainly over the issue of slavery. Americans went to war and slaughtered each other. Othering each other and othering those in chains.

I don't want to bore you with history but context is everything...The Civil War began in April 1861 but there were precursors to the war that help make my point today... In the early 1800s there were already lengthy conversations about what to do with the old and new states in the Union. When new states were added as “free states”, the balance of free to non-free states was always in jeopardy. Very early before the war began, as early as the 1820s the south was discussing seceding.

They had disdain and distrust of northerners. As I said, Southerners wanted state sovereignty “States rights” to protect their investment in free human labor and “their way of life” as some put it.

The southern slave owners were powerful men but also fearful of losing their means to live. North and south saw each other as “Hatfield’s and McCoy’s”.

Cultural paradigm shifts create fear and fear is a great motivator to start “othering” people.

It (fear mongering) happened when Abraham Lincoln was elected. He was a part of a new Republican party. Lincoln personally abhorred slavery, and was against its expansion westward. And he ran on that platform in 1860 and won with 40% of the vote. But he did not win one southern state—very similar to today’s national elections. Southern blue democrats detested Lincoln, fearing the end was near for their way of life—and it was... “no lie lives forever” as Carlyle put it. But Lincoln was not a saint nor a radical. He was a good & brave man in a polarizing time, but he was much more pro-Union than he was anti-slavery. All of his actions were meant to protect the United States not to rid it of the sin of “othering”. He is known to have said, “A nation divided against itself cannot stand”. And he was right. But one of Lincoln’s solutions was to return blacks to Africa as a plan to rid the country of its “Negro problem”. In other words, “Thanks for building our

nation, now you can go home.” OTHERING. This still haunts us today (this question of the “other” relates to the black and brown others on the border and in our communities. *What do we do with them? How should we treat them? What kind of relationship should we have with them? What do we do with those that make us most uncomfortable? How much stretching must I do?* We ALL have to stretch because we are all infected with turning the OTHER into the enemy.

Emancipation came in 1865 for blacks, but freedom is still a fledgling idea for this nation. Freedom by word is not freedom by deed. You can pass legislation—that’s important—but if there is no SOUL behind the written words then there is no lasting progress that can be made.

Slavery ended in 1865 but it did not die—it continued in share cropping and low wages, and through marginalization and suppression and some could argue that the vestiges of slavery continue today. Slavery ended but “Othering” has not stopped.

After slavery ended, southern landowners, who were also influential politicians—those with money generally get involved in politics to protect their interests—used voter suppression and fear, ‘they will take our jobs and we will end up worse than them.’ (sound familiar?) This mindset has been pervasive in our history and it has kept us from truly SEEING each other and creating a peaceful society.

Othering was present when the KKK emerged in the 1860s; it was there in Tulsa in 1921 with the Tulsa Riots; it was there in the 1950s when Rev. Martin Luther King emerged with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. There is something divine about where King emerges in Montgomery Alabama. Here's another little known fact: Martin King, leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, walk/march to Selma, and minister at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church which, if you've been there, is just a stone's throw from the state capital building in Alabama. Not only did King preach on the steps of the capitol after the Selma march saying, those majestic words... *"How long? Not long until you reap what you so...How long? Not long because truth crushed to earth shall rise again...Because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord"*. Right there, across the street from the first church he pastored, where the Civil Rights Movement was born, King was speaking in the very spot where the Confederacy began. YES, where the confederacy had its first convention—where it housed its only president, Jefferson Davis. The civil rights movement began where the confederacy began. Sit with that... Martin Luther King from Atlanta, winds up in Montgomery—birthplace of the confederacy—and is asked to lead the bus boycott—and eventually the civil rights movement.... It feels almost orchestrated by some higher intelligence.... As if some great Power was saying, "Your work is not done". In this place where evil and good were born humanity had to decide what kind of nation we would be—

SLAVE or FREE? Spirit is perhaps saying, *“You will face this issue of othering again and again and again and again until you realize I made all of you in my image because I don’t make no junk!”*

King emerges on the scene but the game was already well in motion. From the Revolutionary War to Civil War to Civil Rights the game has always been the same. Britain (and other European powers) creating loyal subjects (othering) from Africa to India to Canada and America—subduing people and teaching the toxic pattern of subjugation....

Our forefathers in the beginning were not quite smart enough when they broke away in 1776. They should have abolished slavery immediately after independence, but held on to that evil institution. And then it all just trickles down to every fiber of life, making a mockery out of the dream of freedom, justice, equity, and equality.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King had a simple message: *We are minorities in this nation—your ancestors brought us here. It’s not our fault. We should be treated fairly. When you see us struggle it is because the dream has been unrealized. The victims are being made into the villains in your narrative. We look different but we are people too so see us, hear us, love us. God made us too! Give us access to opportunities, fair pay, voting rights, enfranchise us don’t*

disenfranchise us. On our backs we built your country; don't we deserve human decency and fairness too?

This message today is not about colonization or manifest destiny or whiteness. Rather, today is about the larger issue of OTHERING that has led to countless bloodshed and violence.

We are all products of our culture—products of our environment—products of what our parents said to us, geographic location, and the like. As part of our human DNA, we like teams and picking sides. I'm for the Red Team—I'm for the Blue Team. Tribal loyalties can sometimes cause us to do and say things that do not align with our best stuff. It's easy to get caught up in this fervor of “my side wins”. When this is sports or games—it can be fun and playfully mischievous, but when we are discussing different races and cultures—human beings—this can become dangerous depending on who has the power. When compassion and compromise are lost, tyranny manifests.

The Civil War of yesterday and today is the **war for civility**. The question remains: Can I respectfully share space and resources with you? Can I live with you, shop with you, play with you, and marry you? Can I put aside my tribalism for the higher cause of beloved community? If we are to make this dream real, we must understand civility as a part the human social contract. To find peace, we

must insist on *justice equity and compassion in human relations*, one of our UU principles. This **war for civility** means that sometimes “the last must be first and the first last...” It means we can’t win every argument. It means that we have to give people the benefit of the doubt when we meet them and that we will try as hard as we can to find the God inside of them. **The war for civility** is speaking this morning reminding us through history that we will keep repeating the bad stuff until we reconcile it in our hearts. **The war for civility** reminds us that what we see today with our prisons, and low wages, and misogyny and all this talk about barriers and walls—that a huge spiritual abyss exists in our souls—that there is a vast spiritual deficit in our nation and all around the world because of “othering.”

On this special MLK Sunday, I pray for our freedom. Not physical freedom but our spiritual freedom which hopes, dreams and believes in our human ability to have faith in life and each other, despite the evidence. And that it’s possible (our theme this month) to turn this world around. I will not let go of that hope. I see progress among the regress. I see improvement amidst relapse. I know that just as King emerges on the steps of the birthplace of the Confederacy that there are things in motion—seen and unseen that are bending that arc toward justice. I will—I must hold on to that!

I want to ask you this morning to WAKE UP even more to the truth of how hard it is to overcome the sociological and sometimes warped religious programming that

seeks to separate and divide us from each other. Reconciling our relationship with “the other” whoever that other be—is our great work on this planet and, as I said, we will keep repeating this lesson until we learn it or, god forbid, annihilate ourselves. I prefer the former. I will keep hope alive.

Sara Jones sent me a hopeful email about the spiritual Motherless Child we sang today and how the arranger of the version, HT Burleigh, ends the solemn song with a major key instead of a minor key as is usually done. He did this because he wanted to keep hope alive... I get that. We must keep believing that we can turn things around. As the late Rev. Fred Kaan said, “*we must keep uttering our cry until peace prevails*”. Rev. Kaan gets the last word. He was a Congregationalist minister who lived through the Nazi occupation. He saw three of his grandparents die of starvation. He wrote hymns about war and peace. One of them found their way into our hymnal #137 We Utter Our Cry. Kaan knew first-hand what “othering” can do. He wanted humans to choose hope and love. You heard some of his words during the prayer but hear them again as I close; and may this be our prayer on this blessed MLK Sunday...

BY FRED KAAAN

We utter our cry: that peace may prevail,
that earth will survive and faith must not fail.
We pray with our life for the world in our care,
for people diminished by doubt and despair.

We cry from the fright of our daily scene
for strength to say 'no!' to all that is mean:
designs bearing chaos, extinction of life,
all energy wasted on weapons of death.

We lift up our hearts for children unborn:
give wisdom, O God, that we may hand on
replenished and tended - this good planet earth,
preserving the future and wonder of birth.

Creator of life, come, share out, we pray
your Spirit on earth, revealing the Way
to leaders conferring round tables for peace,
that they may from bias and guile be released.

Amen.