

Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Solemn Evensong
Genesis 37:17b-20, Luke 6:27-36

Dangerous Unselfishness

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
Lenten Sermon Series: “A Grain of Wheat”: Martyrs of Our Time
April 3, 2022

“Very truly, I tell you, unless *a grain of wheat* falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Good afternoon. It’s wonderful to be back and preaching once again from this great pulpit after a mere 26-month hiatus. Well, better late than never. Thanks be to God!

This is the fifth and final sermon in our Lenten evensong series on contemporary martyrs. As your theologian in residence, I’d like to use this occasion to propose a three-part theology of martyrdom. But I’d like to do so in the context of the last 24 hours of the life of the great 20th century martyr, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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On this day fifty-four years ago – April 3, 1968 – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered what would turn out to be the final speech of his life. Dr. King had arrived in Memphis, Tennessee, earlier that day to support the city’s Black sanitation workers who were on strike due to terrible working conditions.

Dr. King was originally scheduled to speak at a rally that evening. But as the day wore on, he decided to stay at his motel. It was raining heavily, and he was feeling sick – exhausted from his nonstop travels. But around 9:00 pm, Dr. King changed his mind because some three thousand people had come out in the storm to hear him.

So Dr. King went to the rally and spoke for around forty minutes without any notes. He ended up giving one of the most powerful speeches in his life, a speech that is popularly known as his “Mountaintop Speech.” Dr. King ended by prophetically alluding to his own death. He said:

I’ve been to the mountaintop. . . . Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. . . . I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

The next day, April 4, 1968, Dr. King was shot and killed by an assassin’s bullet while he was standing on the balcony of his motel. He was just 39 years old.

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As I mentioned earlier, I would like to propose a three-part theology of martyrdom based upon the life and ministry of Dr. King. First, martyrdom is about the church. Second, martyrdom is about bearing witness to the gospel, even in the face of hatred. And third, martyrdom is about “dangerous unselfishness.”

Let us address each of these ideas in turn.

First of all, martyrdom is about the church. In technical terms, martyrdom is an ecclesiological matter. True martyrdom results in the growth of the church. Not by extremism or fanaticism, but by changing people’s hearts.

As you know, this Lenten sermon series is called “A Grain of Wheat.” This phrase is taken from John 12:24, in which Jesus says:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Like a grain of wheat, the martyr does not cease to exist when they die. In fact, the exact opposite thing happens. The martyr’s death ends up bearing much fruit by drawing many others into the church. As the great Latin church father Tertullian wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

This has certainly been true in the aftermath of Dr. King’s assassination. Instead of disappearing from the public view, Dr. King’s legacy continues to live on in the lives and ministries of people all around the world. This is true for the Anglican Communion. Dr. King is one of the great ten modern martyrs who are commemorated above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey in London.

Dr. King’s legacy also lives on in the Episcopal Church. Tomorrow, April 4th, is his heavenly birthday. And so it is also his feast day in the calendar of saints of the church.

Finally, Dr. King’s legacy lives on in this parish. As many of you know, there is a statue of Dr. King that is on the bell tower of our church. The statue was installed in 1972 by the tenth rector, Fr. Morris, as one of four statues on the theme of “liberation.”

Martyrdom is a doctrine about the church.

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Second, martyrdom is about bearing witness to the gospel, even in the face of hatred. The word “martyr” comes from the Greek word *martyreo*. *Martyreo* means to “bear witness” or to “give testimony.” Think *Law and Order*. Think, for example, about a trial witness who is sitting in the witness box and who is being questioned by the prosecutor or the defense attorney.

The witness’ job is to testify to what they have experienced and to convince the judge and jury of the truth of their experience. The martyr is called to do the same thing. The martyr is called to testify – not just with words, but also with action – to the gospel, or the good news, of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The martyr’s life testifies to being redeemed from sin by Jesus Christ and therefore being freed to love God and to love neighbor fully.

Dr. King's life was dedicated to bearing witness to the gospel, even in the face of hatred. Like Jesus, he preached a message of nonviolence. Tonight's reading from the Gospel According to Luke sums up the central message of Dr. King's ministry:

[Jesus said,] "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. . . . But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."

Even in the face of horrific death threats to him and his family, Dr. King continued his ministry of love. In fact, Dr. King's flight to Memphis that morning had been delayed by a bomb threat. He and his associates had to get off the plane and wait until everything was cleared. It was a scary moment. It was said that Dr. King's bodyguard was the first one to get off that plane! But everything eventually checked out. And so everyone got back on that plane and flew to Memphis so that Dr. King could be in solidarity with the striking sanitation workers.

Martyrdom is bearing witness to the gospel, even in the face of hatred.

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Third and finally, martyrdom is about "dangerous unselfishness." Dangerous unselfishness was an important theme in Dr. King's last speech. He used it to describe the Christian vocation and to explain why he was in Memphis in solidarity with the striking sanitation workers.

Towards the end of his life, Dr. King began speaking out about issues other than just civil rights. This included his opposition to the Vietnam war and his commitment to economic justice and the "Poor People's Campaign." Many people were confused as to why he was taking on so many different issues. The answer was because Dr. King was committed to a life of dangerous unselfishness.

Let me explain.

Dr. King spoke about the Parable of the Good Samaritan in his last speech. He noted how the priest and the Levite walked past the man who had been beaten by robbers and who was left to die on the dangerous road to Jericho. Now Dr. King had sympathy for the religious leaders in Jesus' parable. He gave them the benefit of the doubt. He speculated that perhaps they walked by the beaten man because they were afraid. Perhaps they were thinking that it might be a trap for them.

By contrast, the Samaritan – a person of a different race and religion – stopped to help the man despite the danger. He not only stopped, but he bandaged the man's wounds. He took the man to an inn. And he paid the innkeeper to care for the man.

For Dr. King, the Samaritan was the example *par excellence* of living a life of dangerous unselfishness. The real question, Dr. King said, was not what the priest and the Levite asked themselves. They asked: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" The real question is what the Samaritan asked: "If I do *not* stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

This bears repeating. The question is not: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" Rather, the question is: "If I do *not* stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

That's why Dr. King went to Memphis. That's why he opposed the Vietnam War and was committed to economic justice. And that's why he was killed.

Martyrdom is about living a life of dangerous unselfishness.

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All of the contemporary martyrs that we've heard about during these past five weeks – Maximilian Kolbe, Elizabeth of Russia, Wong-Chang Lee, Jun-Kyung Moon, Manche Masemola, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – all of them lived lives of dangerous unselfishness.

But they were also dreamers. They dreamed of a better world in which peace and justice would reign. But like many dreamers, they paid the ultimate price. We heard about this danger in tonight's reading from the Book of Genesis about Joseph and his older brothers. Joseph's brothers were jealous of the fact that God spoke to Joseph in dreams and that their father loved him the most. They said:

Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a dream – an eschatological vision if you will. That one day “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” As a nation, we have come a long way from how things stood in Memphis on April 3, 1968. But there is still so much further that we need to go.

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As Lent draws to a close and we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week, I invite you to reflect upon the theology of martyrdom that I have just articulated. Martyrdom is about the church. Martyrdom is about bearing witness to the gospel, even in the face of hatred. And martyrdom is about dangerous unselfishness.

Jesus, like our contemporary martyrs, lived a life of dangerous unselfishness. And like our contemporary martyrs, Jesus had an eschatological vision – or dream – about a New Jerusalem in which peace and justice would reign. And like them, Jesus paid the ultimate price.

Let us remember The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on this eve of his feast day with his powerful message about dangerous unselfishness. Dr. King's observation is more relevant than ever in light of the war in the Ukraine, the polarized and hateful political scapegoating of the “other,” including LGBTQ persons, the economic disparities arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spike in racially-motivated attacks on Asian Americans, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

The question is not “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” Rather, the question is “If I do *not* stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

That is what it means to be a “grain of wheat” in God's kingdom. And that is what it means to be a witness to the gospel.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.