

Listen for the Dream – Sermon Text

It's been 53 years since the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. A speech so famous that I remember hearing parts of it from an early age, even though I grew in Canada, another country. I remember hearing it, not really understanding the larger context of what it was about. I can still recite sections of it, word for word, even though I grew up in another country, where there wasn't a national holiday honoring his work.

This part in particular stuck with me:

"I have a dream... That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Maybe it was because I was a child when I heard these words, but something about them went right to my heart. What world were his four little children living in? Was it different than mine? I certainly didn't have many children of color in my school. I didn't really know what he meant, except that I felt what he was saying was somehow larger, somehow it did impact me.

Now the context of racial issues is different in Canada than it is in the United States, however, the message seemed pretty clear to my young mind. We shouldn't be treating people differently based on something like skin color.

And it was a dream so clear, so simple, so powerful, that something about it stuck with me even though I was living in a different time and in a different country.

I wonder, what do you remember about first hearing those words. Did you hear them in school? Did you hear them on the radio when they were spoken? How did they make you feel? And when you hear them today, how has that changed?

So, in 2016, 53 years later in the United States of America. I wonder. How are we doing on that dream?

How are we doing on that dream, when it seems so often we hear about unarmed black men being killed unjustly by the police?

How are we doing on that dream, when one in three black boys born in the United States will be incarcerated over his lifetime?

How are we doing on that dream, when there is studies show that black children are punished more severely for the same behavior as white children in schools?

My friends, I ask you, how are we doing on that dream?

Because when I think about these things, I can start to feel hopeless. I wonder what progress we've made. And wonder what is there we can really do.

But this isn't a sermon about my hopelessness, or about our hopelessness. It's about dreams. Or rather The Dream. Because when I hear those words, something is ignited in me, and I don't want to give up, and I want to have hope. And I do.

Which isn't to say I haven't felt hopeless.

I recently saw the movie Selma, which, I'm sure many you have seen. It describes the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights marches and it features Martin Luther King, as well as Unitarian Universalist Minister James Reeb. When watching I was struck by the similarities of what was happening then and what is happening in this country today.

I saw four black girls killed by a bomb at a black Baptist church, and I thought about the shooting at the black Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston this past summer.

I saw them marching from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights, and I thought about how just two years ago the supreme court of the United States struck down a section of the Voting Rights Act that helped combat racial discrimination.

I saw the police use force against the peaceful protesters, and I thought about the treatment of black people by the police today.

And I saw Martin Luther King, the leader of a movement, a national hero be declared dangerous, and I thought about we say the same thing about the Black Lives Matter movement.

The similarities were so striking to me, so in focus. Has it been 53 years?

And like I said, it's easy to feel hopeless. It's easy to want to close your eyes and close your ears to what's happening.

I mean, it's easy, if you're white.

Last week I was on the phone with my friend Sean. Sean is a black man, and has been a friend of mine for over a decade. I was talking to him about how I had been thinking lately about how easy it was to close my eyes and ears to the racism that people of color experience every day. We had the following conversation which he gave me permission to share with you all today.

"Did they ever tell you how to deal with the police if you are pulled over?" He asked.

"Uh... Whose they?" I responded.

“I don’t know. People when you were growing up?”

“Not that I can recall...” I said.

“Wow, both my parents have told me. It’s enough that when I see a cop, if there is an easy place for me to pull over and out of the way, I’ll do it. Because this is how it would go. If I’m on my motorcycle and he came up to me because I rolled through a stop sign, he’d ask me to take off my helmet. To do that, I need to take off my gloves. But they get nervous when they can’t see what you are doing with your hands. So I’d first ask permission to take off my gloves. Then, I’d ask if I could take off my helmet. Then I would ask if I could place them on the ground, because I don’t want him to think I’m using them to hide something. Then I would place them on the ground between me and him so he wouldn’t think I was hiding something on the other side of my bike. Then, he’d ask me for my license and registration. So my license is in my back pocket, which should be fine. But my registration is in my backpack, which could hold a weapon. So again, I’d tell him that my registration is in my backpack and I need to get it. Before he’s even had time to tell me what I was pulled over for, he’s already had three chances to get freaked out and shoot me.”

The truth is that I, Otto, I’m *aware* of this phenomenon. It’s called “Driving while black” or “driving while brown.” It happens in our communities. If you look at the Holliston police report, for example, you’ll see disproportionate number of Latino names under traffic violations.

But I didn’t think about the detail in which my friend Sean had been forced to think about this. Details that I haven’t thought about because I’m white.

Because Sean is my close friend I tentatively asked him if he was scared, in light of everyone that seems to be happening to black people in this country.

“I’m asking because *I’m* scared for you. I’m scared of what could happen to you. I don’t know if that’s the right thing to say, but I’m scared.”

“That’s because you didn’t grow up with it,” he said, “this has been a part of my life, my whole life.”

And it makes it feel like there isn’t much I can do. And the uncertainty is real. And this uneasiness is real. If you believe, as I do, that we are a far cry from the dream, but feel like there isn’t anything you can do, you are not alone.

But we can listen. And we can follow. Sean’s experience and my experience are fundamentally different in this way. And for those of us who are white, it’s easy to ignore.

Segregation is still widespread. 75% percent of white people report that they don't have *any* friends who are people of color. This isn't to shame anyone. This is the way our country is set up. And it's hard to care about these statistics and these issues if it's a theoretical concept rather than a personal one.

It's one thing to hear that one in three black boys born in this country will end up in prison over the course of their lives. It's another to know a black boy that was recently born and the condition of the whole and country that he was born into.

So without many friends who are people of color, many white people have no one in their lives to tell us about their experiences of racial discrimination, because they are black or brown, or Latino or Arab, and white people hear about it on the news. And when you hear about something on the news, when you hear statistics, it's hard to get motivated to do something about it.

But what are we supposed to do anyways?

You see, I think that's what I hear a lot from white folks that I know. We support racial justice, we support Black Lives Matter, but what are we supposed to do?

And in that question I hear a lot of things. I hear fear. What will happen if I speak up? What will happen to me? What if I say the wrong thing? What if I say the right thing? How will I even know? I have heard these fears from many of my white friends. I've had these fears.

But closing our eyes and ears is not a better solution. Because those of us who are white, we too suffer from segregation. We too contribute to a society where people are color are oppressed. Because there is another alternative. Because Martin Luther King had a dream for all of us.

The Black Lives Matter has been a controversial movement from the moment it began – as a twitter hashtag following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who killed Trayvon Martin a black teenager in his own neighborhood, in 2013. And I've wondered why.

Because, honestly, I don't really understand what about it that's so controversial. As a Unitarian Universalist, I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Of course I believe that Black Lives Matter.

Nowhere in that sentence do I hear "black lives before other lives," or "black lives matter, and nobody else's does." What I hear is a powerful statement that says, "Hey, listen up. We are getting the message that black lives don't matter, and we are here to remind everyone that they do."

The statement is a response to the loss of black lives, due to police violence. Due to our biased criminal justice system. Due to men with guns who go into black churches and kill because of hate. Because those people are black. Because of the color of their skin.

What's more is when I hear Black Lives Matter, I hear the dream. I hear Martin Luther King saying "I have a dream!" And I hear hope. And I join in. Because we've got to have hope.

I hear that the lives of those black people that I love matter. I hear that the life of my friend Sean matters just as much as mine.

You see, I will never know what it's like to be black in America. I will never know what it's like to be a person of color in America.

But I can listen.

I can listen for the truth, even if it's painful to hear, and I can listen for the dream, because the dream is full of hope. You have to have both.

Sean told me about his hope. He said "You know, the thing about all the news coverage about the treatment of black people in the criminal justice system, is that it's not that it hasn't been happening before. It's that finally, it's reported on because it's unacceptable and out of the ordinary. So please, keep being upset. Because the moment you stop finding it horrifying, is the moment we lose."

We all have anxiety about getting things wrong. And the truth is, we *will* get things wrong. It's inevitable. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to the words of people of color when they say they are being oppressed. That doesn't mean we shouldn't listen for the dream.

Because what it's really about is a dream of a reality different than the world we are experiencing. A dream of a world where Black Lives DO Matter, just as much as white ones.

Those of us who are white can listen. We can listen to the stories of people of color. And we can listen to the messages they tell us. And we can believe them.

We can believe Latino people when they tell us they are getting profiled in our communities, for driving while brown.

We can believe black people when they tell us they are getting targeted by the police.

It's easy to feel hopeless. And, by and large, those of us who are white have the fortune to not *have* to think about these things. We can move through the world and not worry that that police officer is going to pull us over because of our skin color. Our white skin can be seen as a sign of trust by other white people that people of color just aren't afforded.

But just because we don't have to think about these things, doesn't mean that we shouldn't. I get that it's hard. I get that it's scary. But there is a great injustice in this country.

Because I also believe that you care. I believe that you believe in Dr. King's dream. I believe that you want to see it become a reality.

And I believe that the way to do that is to listen to people of color. To listen to what they are saying. To listen to what they are doing. And to support them as the leaders of this movement.

Listen for the dream, because the dream is where the hope is.

May it be so.