

**Actions Speak Loudest**  
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All Souls Church, New York City  
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I confess openly to you that I stand before you this morning with grave concern. As we gather today, fifty-three years out from that historic march on Selma which first turned the stomachs of complacent Americans and then turned the tide of history toward justice, I stand here trembling: a white-passing speaker on a day of hugely significant Black history - eager to serve yet intensely aware that in this country, the voice of the white speaker is heard everywhere and often, and many of you may be hungry today for something other than what words can convey. I can certainly understand that. But if we share concerns, you may also be carrying with you a disease with the way this very day is now handled. A day set aside to commemorate a great man, one who heard and answered the call of history and his people at the cost of his life. And more than that: a day set aside to commemorate the work that he, with millions of others, accomplished at great personal cost and sacrifice...well, maybe you also feel that that day has grown thinner in places throughout the years, as corporations and retailers exploit it with sales and politicians use it as an opportunity to take an hour to showcase regard and then, too often, head off to chambers where they cast votes that reduce the possibilities available to those same constituents. And it may be worse yet that too many people wake up each Martin Luther King, Jr. Monday and say peacefully, "What a great man. Thank goodness he did all that work back then, so I don't have to," and then go about their lives as if the work for justice were done, years ago by one exceptional man.

All of this makes clear to me that this particular Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. day is more essential than ever. We need to remember not Dr. King the myth, but Dr. King the man who worked and sacrificed and feared and bled. The man who was at first hesitant to answer the call of justice. The man who sacrificed time with his wife and family to be constantly on the road toward freedom. The man who stayed up late writing and rewriting, crafting words that would be powerful enough to change minds. The man who was tired and discouraged, and needed friends and loved ones to help him find the strength to go out and fight another day. The real human man, who did what he could as long as he could. Because if we imagine Dr. King was a myth, a superhero who did what we could not, then we will not understand that we can and must do what he did. We must step out, risk, rise to our own moment in history.

Because there is a call to justice, my friends. It was always there - Dr. King's dream has never been fully fulfilled. But this past year threw a harsh and brutal light onto the distance between the world he dreamed of and the world that is. The open massing of white supremacists in Charlottesville and many other places, with the explicit support of the current President. The ascendancy of the New Jim Crow, with voter suppression acts passing in state legislatures - acts that target women, people of color, students. We have the school to prison pipeline, unfair and inhumane sentencing laws, and micro-aggressions too numerous to mention. Most of you here this morning have no need for me or anyone else to list out the work that needs to be done, and no one can adequately speak to the pain that comes when we look at how far we have yet to go. What we need at this moment is to gird our loins once again, to look around and see who our friends and allies are, and accept the mantle that history calls each of us to.

Until he showed up to do the work, Dr. King was not the Dr. King of legend. He was a man with the same concerns of any other man. Annie Lee Cooper was a woman who wanted the same as

any other woman. Jimmy Lee Jackson didn't begin his work assuming he would be called to martyrdom. They just got up in the morning, and did their best to create a world of freedom and justice, and to do the work that history put into their hands. That's what we must do, as well.

This is a pivotal moment in history, just like 1963 and 1965 - but also just like every day is. We are called as Dr. King was called, and we are called to the same exact work: to ensure that voting is free and fair and that every US citizen has the same open access to the ballot box and every privilege that derives from it. To see to it that justice is not predicated on the color of one's skin, to work against racial profiling in every regard, and to work for things like immigration reform and on behalf of the refugee. We must wake in the morning and be ready to speak to those in power to reform sentencing laws and to reform a broken justice system, especially one that increasingly insists that children are adults and houses our most vulnerable with our most dangerous. We need to get into schools and make sure our children are fed before we can expect them to learn. More than 51% of all public school children now live in poverty. 51%! Dr. King died literally fighting against the structures that hold people in poverty. Today, more people than ever have fallen below that line and income inequality is at record highs. We have the highest income disparity of any developed country. Dr. King is not here today to do this work for us. It is OUR work to do - yours, and mine.

That is what MLK Day is about. It is our chance to remember the life and example of a remarkable, remarkable man. But it is not then to brush off our hands and go back to our comfort and ease. It is to inspire us to find our own place in the work of justice.

53 years ago at Selma, Dr. King said, "My people, my people, listen. The battle is in our hands. The battle is in our hands in Mississippi and Alabama and all over the United States. I know there is a cry today... When will Martin Luther King, SCLC, SNCC, and all of these civil rights agitators and all of the white clergy... and labor leaders and students and others get out of our community and let [us] return to normalcy?"

"But I have a message that I would like to leave with [you] this evening. That is exactly what we don't want, and we will not allow it to happen, for we know that it was normalcy in Marion that led to the brutal murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson. It was normalcy in Birmingham that led to the murder on Sunday morning of four beautiful, unoffending, innocent girls. It was normalcy on Highway 80 that led state troopers to use tear gas and horses and billy clubs against unarmed human beings who were simply marching for justice. It was normalcy by a cafe in Selma, Alabama, that led to the brutal beating of Reverend James Reeb.

"It is normalcy all over our country which leaves [people] perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast ocean of material prosperity. It is normalcy all over Alabama that prevents the Negro from becoming a registered voter. No, we will not allow Alabama to return to normalcy. [Applause]

"The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and worth of all of God's children. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that allows judgment to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy of brotherhood, the normalcy of true peace, the normalcy of justice."

If this year has taught us anything, it is that this cannot be our normal. So I implore you to recognize today for what it is, the call again to the work of justice. That call to march and to write

letters and to use our power to meet personally with legislators and leaders who can help us create change. If we must disrupt what is normal to create justice, so be it. We are no less than our parents and grandparents. And we are not alone. This is not a fight by one group of people. Just as when Dr. King issued his call in Selma, people of goodwill and caring will respond - people of every creed and faith, of every ethnicity and background, rich people and poor people and middle class, educated and illiterate. We will rise together. We will rise together because I still believe that love is stronger than hate. We will rise together because we, too, have a dream - the dream of a world where all of God's children can live together in peace, and none will go to sleep hungry, and none will live in fear for their lives or the lives of their children. My beloved friends - will you answer that call today? Can we, together, march forward into tomorrow together, honoring King's legacy not by lionizing him but by living his example and working for his dream?

I believe this is what we are called to, and not one of us is excused from the call of history. May we lean on one another and be sustained by love as we answer.

*Amen.*