

## MLK SUNDAY HOMILY

A homily by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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During Barack Obama's campaign for president, Cornel West served as one of his most vocal and vigorous champions, appearing in 65 campaign events on Obama's behalf. Eight years later, West has become one of Obama's most strident critics. Last Monday, West contributed an op-ed to the *Guardian* titled, "Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama." Using his trademark incendiary prose, West writes, "The reign of Obama did not produce the nightmare of Donald Trump – but it did contribute to it. And those Obama cheerleaders who refused to make him accountable bear some responsibility."

In a new book titled *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*, the Princeton professor Eddie S. Glaude Jr. charts the rising disappointment with Obama over the past eight years among many liberals, both black and white. This disappointment was predictable, Glaude says, because Obama's personal charisma and his lack of a political past allowed people to project outsized expectations upon him.

Glaude writes, "We made Obama whatever we wanted him to be. If we wanted an antiwar candidate, he was it. If we wanted someone who supported universal health care he was it; someone who would challenge Wall Street, he was our guy; a candidate committed to the poor, Obama was our man. He was our political Play-Doh. And he obliged our fantasies all the way to the White House."

Glaude notes that Obama himself said as much in *The Audacity of Hope*: "I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which

people of vastly different political stripes project their own views,” Obama wrote. “As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them.”

Like most Americans, Obama is liberal in the following sense. He believes in individual rights, relatively free markets, and a government that’s minimally intrusive in our individual efforts to maximize our ambitions. Within this framework, individuals play their part as independent rational actors who are capable of choosing their own values and ends.

While this represents a laudable political goal, here’s the problem: if you act like that’s the way the world already works, you’ll actually move further away from your goal, not closer to it. The lives of ordinary black people have gotten worse during Obama’s presidency, not better, confirming the assumptions both liberals and conservatives tend to hold about black people.

For his part, Glaude puts it this way: “Conservatives tend to think of black people as responsible for their own failures. Liberals tend to point to environments that make them fail. In both instances, the constant refrain is that black people fail. What gets lost in all this are the actual lives of real black people.”

We’re never going to resolve the still-metastasizing disease of our racist past by blithely clinging to demonstrably-false belief that free markets, small government, and individual initiative alone will cure our ills. They haven’t, and they won’t. Only when we value people more than we value things – and value morality more than we value money – will we be able to address the original sin of our nation.

In April of 1967, Dr. King addressed a gathering at Riverside Church here in New York. His topic was the war in Vietnam. He spoke about why our nation should end our involvement there, and how we should conduct ourselves on the world stage in the

aftermath. But his larger concern was the pitched global battle between capitalism and communism. In his view, the axis of the battle needed to shift from asking the economic question of how we should divide up the things of this world to asking the moral question of how we should treat the people of this world. He didn't doubt that capitalism and the West would eventually prevail. His concern was that they prevail in the right way and for the right reasons. He said:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society.... A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.... The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values....

Unless this revolution occurs, our nation and its leaders will continue to disappoint us. Somehow, we need to learn how to see differently — to view the weak, the poor, and the powerless as our foremost political responsibility. This will require shaking the foundations of a nation whose political, economic, cultural, and even religious underpinnings assume the privilege of white people over black people.

Is this revolution likely? No, but that's the reason for prophets and dreamers, for protesters and activists: to hold before us what is true, and good, and right, and to insist that we measure ourselves and our conduct by an enduring standard. If we fall short, which we will inevitably do, we renew our resolve and make another start. This is the time for a new beginning.

In Dr. King's words:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.... If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

No is the time for us to rise above our disappointment and rededicate ourselves to the work that lies ahead. The struggle to insist that our nation embody its ideals for everyone will inevitably be long and sometime bitter. But it's morally essential and spiritually necessary.

In the end, the question will not be whether Barack Obama disappointed us or even whether Dr. King disappointed us. The question is whether we will disappoint ourselves. Will we rise to the challenge of this day? A nation in need of transformation waits in hope. And it's not yet too late.