

MLK SUNDAY HOMILY

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
January 17, 2016

I wonder if you would be in church this morning if you had won the Powerball lottery on Wednesday night. My guess is that figuring out what to do with a \$1.3 billion windfall could prove to be a significant distraction.

It's true that the after-tax payout to a single winner —there turned out to be three winners — would only have been \$983 million. And it's also true that \$983 million would not put you on the Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest Americans. Nonetheless, however much you worried about money before winning the lottery, you would have been even more worried after winning — if in a somewhat different way.

Money, after all, has value mainly as a proxy for other values, such as economic power, political influence, social standing, and material possessions. After you had spent some of your windfall buying things lottery winners typically buy, and after you had given a generous share of your winnings to All Souls, you would eventually have to figure out what you actually wanted to accomplish in this world. What difference would you want to make with your money? My hope is that you would use your winnings to expand the domain of justice, equality, and human dignity.

Whatever your answer, I know one thing: making a difference doesn't depend on winning the lottery. Dr. King once said, "We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles rather than by the quality of our service and relationship to humankind." My guess is that Dr. King would say not to worry about winning the lottery. Whatever difference you would try to make decisively with \$983 million in the bank you should try to make incrementally with whatever you have in the bank. And besides, if you did win the lottery, you might get distracted. Instead, get busy — or stay busy — serving the cause of justice, equality, and human dignity, using whatever talents and resources you have.

On these terms, Dr. King set a high standard for making a difference. He would easily make a list of the 400 most influential Americans of all time. Indeed, he would be listed near the top. The power of his preaching, the clarity of his vision, and the courage of his leadership significantly bent the long arc of our nation's character toward justice. We are a vastly different nation — and a vastly better one — because he helped make it so.

Standing here in Dr. King's shadow, we can see how his immense personal and political talents rose to meet the immense spiritual and political challenges of his day. And it's easy for us to look at the immense challenges to justice, equality and human dignity in our day and lament that none of us is Dr. King, which we aren't. But just

because we aren't Dr. King doesn't mean we don't have a voice and a vision. It doesn't mean we can't take action. Whatever difference we could decisively make if we were Dr. King, we can incrementally make by being who we are.

Making a difference in this world doesn't depend on winning the lottery, and it doesn't depend on being as visionary and talented as Dr. King. It depends on us using whatever resources and talents we have to make whatever difference we can make.

And now is the time for us to make a difference. As Dr. King himself once said, "We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men and women willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always right to do right."

And time turns out to be the most valuable resource we have. You and I have been given this day, and thus we have won the richest lottery of all. For us, the time is right. Now is the time to serve the cause of justice, and equality, and human dignity. Now is the time to do what we can to make whatever difference we can make.