

KINDLE THE SPIRIT



FIRE OF COMMITMENT

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No one was going to be able to sing it, see, not a soul. No one could dream of making it through Dr. King's favorite hymn, Precious Lord, at his funeral. And Dr. King knew this, so he asked his friend the immortal Mahalia Jackson to do it for everyone who couldn't, and she said, "I will do this for my friend because it's what he has asked of me." She sang Precious Lord at the public funeral for Dr. King at Morehouse College in Atlanta on April 9th, 1968, and it was like she tore the roof off the sky with a thunder clap of agony and everyone there knew exactly how she felt.

A prayer to a movement, a movement to a community, a community to nearly a revolution. What Dr. King built was cut down by cowards afraid of what love can do. It is enough to make you want to scream or sing or both. Some people only know how to tear down. They don't know how to build up. Dr. King was born on January 15th, 1929 in Atlanta, the grandchild of a person who was enslaved. He finished high school at 15 and enrolled at Morehouse. He received his divinity degree at Crozer, which was in Pennsylvania then and started his doctoral work at Boston at BU in the '50s. There, he regularly attended services at Arlington Street Church, a Unitarian church right on the Boston Common. The minister there then was Dana McLean Greeley, who marched with Dr. King from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. He didn't recall meeting him 10 years earlier when he was sitting in the pews. When asked, he remarked he'd wish he'd known he was there because he would've invited him up into the pulpit for something everyone might've enjoyed more.

Dr. King was doing his PhD, as I said, in Boston, and Thurman was the dean of Chapel at the time. He arrived in the last two years of Dr. King's time there, and they more knew each other socially. One story goes that they watched the World Series together at one of their houses. They just kind of hung out. It was later on actually that Thurman influenced Dr. King's thinking a lot. Thurman's work, Jesus

and the Disinherited was reported to be in Dr. King's pocket at all times during the Montgomery bus boycott. He would read it over and over from beginning to end. Thurman's vision, his vision that goes past and through metaphor and image to get at the heart of faiths, convictions, to get at the heart of movements, to feel and expose what is true in them is part of what makes him so important to so many.

He's a mystic, really. It's part of what he has to teach people of faiths like this one who strive to practice open and liberal beliefs. This openness is part of what helped Dr. King's appeals reach so many. The expansiveness of the love that Thurman talked about, that he felt in the world is suffused into King's teachings, into his writings. It was from this unity of all souls, this idea that the interconnectedness, the interrelatedness, the interdependence that those who came to study King later found, traced all the way back to Thurman. We are knit together in this interconnected web of existence.

And from that inspiration, King ministered to a nation in agony. He exposed the hardest truths about inequality and inequity while proving the futility of violence, in maintaining the status quo, and showing a waiting world what planning, what faith, what cooperation, what love could do. In the coming weeks, perhaps later today or tomorrow, it's going to become clear more and more what we feel called to do in the world as a church, as a people of faith, or just as a people of good conscience. But there are some things you need to know right now. First, to those of you who are afraid, who struggle even to speak the fears that you're having, to those whose lives and livelihoods feel under attack, may come under attack, hear this, this church is here for you, right church?

We are going to hold you through this time. You are not alone and we love you. Second, King taught and practiced care for the vulnerable. That's how he moved the cause of equity forward farther than anyone before him had ever done so in this nation. When he was studying in Boston, he longed to be among those who were being treated most unfairly, whose very lives were most in peril. He felt most called to be with them in community. So he went back to Georgia to be with and to serve those who were closest to him and to his heart. Who is closest to you? Who has your heart now? Who will you care for in the days ahead? I'll tell you this, someone you love has had an abortion or will need one. Someone you love needs access to maternal care or will. Someone you love is an immigrant or maybe someone you love is trans, someone you love is poor. Someone you love is treated unfairly because of how they look and their perceived race or ethnicity. Someone you love, trust me, is struggling with mental health and anxiety right now.

Right? And if you don't think any of that's true, then the lies that the powerful are speaking to keep us from our God-given interconnectedness are working and you must not believe those lies. You are not alone. I'm not trying to scare you. I'm not trying to make you sad or worried. What I'm doing is trying to open that door to a journey we are all going to take that Thurman told us we all must take. His words, "One enters through a single door of suffering into the misery of the whole human race with no margin left to mark the place between which was one's own." What is felt belongs nowhere but is

everywhere, binding and holding in a tight circle of agony until all life is gathered into a single timeless gasp.

Someone you love needs this work to be done. You need to love someone to actually do this work, but doing this work isn't how you save somebody else, right?

Congregation:

Right.

Speaker 2:

It's how we save ourselves. That is how mutuality works. Third... I was still on two. I could go back. Third, King tried to dismantle death-dealing systems. When King knew whom he had to serve, where he felt the deepest connection, what did he do next? He fought strategically. He strategized about how systems used and accepted by the public work against those he loves and he strategized about how to stop deadly systems. For King, the system he started with was a system of segregation first, where separating people by their appearance, the dehumanization of someone because of how they look, spelled death too often to too many too easily, and reinforced the rigid economic inequality throughout civic life because it's always about the money.

Right out in front of everyone to see, he chose bus segregation. And this year marks the 70th anniversary of the day that Rosa Parks helped to spark the Montgomery bus boycott. The story goes that we have all heard that Ms. Parks would not move to the back of the bus. Not true, not fair to the truth of history or to Ms. Parks' choice. She was only asked to move one row back. Yeah, one foot. That was all the distance she needed to comply for the status quo to stay. But it was one foot too far. That one foot she would not yield began one of the most successful actions against public racism, against institutionalized privilege, against what was wrong in the history of a nation. And it took more than a year, maybe four. It took more than a year, a lot of walking, and the black residents of Montgomery walked and walked and walked. Churches had shoe drives because people wore out their soles. Talk about being soul weary.

The choir groaned the last service. They're better now. That's good. The boycotters were wearing out their ever-loving shoes. More than a year of work, a surprising Supreme Court victory and decision in the peace of the system that they attacked buckled at last, at last. What are the death-dealing systems touching our lives? The chance that a mother or birthing person will die in Texas is three times the national average if that mother is black, right.

What is that? And the answer to this by the very group appointed by Texas to monitor those deaths is to what?

Ignore it. That's right. To refuse to investigate and report on health outcomes for 2022 and 2023 the two years following Texas's abortion ban. I wasn't going to say this, but guys we're traveling again. I went on Thursday with people who needed healthcare. I know that the travel program had stopped for a while, but we will not be cowed. We will not stop advocating for people that need our help.

We take this seriously. In Tarrant County, seven people have died while incarcerated since 2017 in custody, death dealing systems. Crossing the Rio Grande, and the dangers posed by those trying to help are part of a system that I understand is broken. But where you stand on immigration one way or another, it should not be fatal, should not be a death dealing system. Dr. King knew well, making trouble for public institutions has consequences. We get it. He knew what they were and he was prepared though to accept them. And those of his partners like him who could bear more of the consequences based on their status or privilege, did what they could to take on their proportion of that need. How can we leverage our access? How can we leverage our privilege? How can we leverage our status for the people we love? That is the question.

Now an important word as your minister who loves you, when you answer calls like this, when you bear the weight of real work in the world, real work, you have got to care for yourself in a community. This is essential. You've got to know your limits and your bounds. You've really got to be honest with yourself because we do not need people burning out. We are in a national crisis of mental health right now. You've got to take care of yourself and your loved ones. I get that. Dr. King was always sure that his friends, that those who worked on his campaigns were trained professionally to practice nonviolence. It's not easy. It takes discipline. Rosa Parks didn't just have an idea one day when she got up on the bus, she was trained at the Highlander Folk School, which they are not messing around. She was an officer at the NAACP.

She knew how to handle actions of the state against her. She was prepared and ready to face hatred and arrest. She knew the power of choosing just the right moment to act. And she brought the thunderclap, not the other way around, right?

Practicing and teaching nonviolence on a national scale and living that ethic in his life and his vision for us all changed Dr. King in his career and his life. It was in the last year of his life, he began to speak out against the military industrial complex. He warned of the dangers of wealth inequality. Does this sound familiar to you?

And spoke out against that system where poor people fight in the wars that wealthy people start throughout the world. It's wrong. Here's a word of caution though, friends. It was in response to advocating for nonviolence and for the end of wars that some of his fiercest opposition came. I used to work at the Riverside Church in Harlem where Dr. King preached a famous sermon against the war in Vietnam. And I stood in the pulpit once where he gave that talk. No one else was there, it was just me. I walked the stone hallway that he had to take to get to the church because it wasn't safe for him to walk outside in public. And I sat alone sometimes in that cavernous cathedral where he rang his words up into the rafters like a thunderclap. Sometimes I'd sit there and I'd wonder, "Am I enough? Am I?"

A year to the day after that sermon was when Dr. King was assassinated, on the anniversary. Dr. King's final words after he was shot were to his friend Ben Branch who was attending him. Dr. King said to him, "From the ground, precious Lord, take my hand." And the story goes that Ben sang the song to him as he died. It was a song close to Dr. King, not just because he liked it. It premiered at

Ebenezer Baptist Church. It was the first time it was sung anywhere was at his church. It's a song about passing out of agony and walking hand in hand with a savior. For many of us and the Unitarian Universalist faith, we don't teach about one savior. I get that, one way to enter some kingdom or place. For many of us, the closest we come to the message of that song might be taking the hand of a friend, of a family member, of someone here. But see, Thomas Dorsey wrote that song.

He wrote it for his wife after his wife died in childbirth, maternal mortality, and then for his daughter who died shortly thereafter. He wrote it to reach for something he could only imagine might be past the hardest thing he ever endured. He didn't even know what it was. He found what he needed to realize that agony is only the growing up that love has got to do to become joy. It is the maturing that agony needs to find joy. Thurman's words, "There is nothing new or old, only the knowledge that what comes as the flooding insight of love binds all living things into a single whole." And I pray, I pray, I pray for us that flooding insight of Thurman's vision, that you are not alone. You are not doing anything alone. And if you think forces are trying to isolate you, what is talking to you is a lie that only serves the powerful and who wants you in your place. Do not believe that lie. Can we agree on that? We will not believe that lie.

Believe instead in this truth that Dr. King died to serve, that violence and aggression against any is violence and aggression against all, that inequity for any is inequity for all, that justice is not justice till it's justice for all. You are not alone because we are bound together. And that is why I want to talk to you about Inauguration Day. I want to talk to you about Inauguration Day 2029.

It will be January 15th, 2029. It will be Dr. King's 100th birthday to the day, not the holiday, the day. I can't say what I'm going to be doing that day, neither can any of you. But I want us to commit now with the fire of our faith and commitment to one another, to plan, to strategize, to train, to rest, to gather, to love, to do all the things we must in ways that will honor that day and Dr. King's birth four years from now. How will we commit? What words will we speak to our friends that day? What would be a foot that is too far to take? Whose hand will we be holding then? Cast your vision. At the end of that funeral when Mahalia Jackson sang her friend to heaven with his own last words, a song at the end written with the words of love, passed through the fire of loss. The congregation then rose to sing. And washing over Morehouse College came a song that grew in the fields where generations were enslaved and built this country from nothing for nothing.

It rolled over the fields as a holler to those gathered to sound out warning, to sound out love, to sound out truth. It is there that the words and the tune of We Shall Overcome came to life. We honor the life, the teachings, and the death of Dr. King today, not because he is some sanitized saint of a bygone era, but it is because of his life that is still revealing the hard and real truths that this nation, that our hearts, that this world is facing, that it is only peace that begets peace. It is only love that begets love, and hate will find no quarter here.

