

Yesterday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States. This annual holiday is set aside to honour the life and legacy of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. Many have undertaken to talk about Dr. King's passionate pursuit of justice and equality. These reflections are beautiful and necessary. As I've considered Dr. King's legacy this year, I've been thinking about the themes of courage and power. Welcome to the Covenant Weekly Podcast - Episode 2.

Intro Music

Many are familiar with some soundbites from Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech" delivered on August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In this speech, he is noted for his courage in imagining a reality that was different than the one he lived in. He embodied courage as he invited 200,000 people present that day and millions who have read or heard his words since to imagine the same reality. Having the courage to imagine and speak out about a reality that cannot be seen yet is remarkable.

Others among us are familiar with his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" written in response to criticism of his nonviolent direct-action directed at him by a group of white clergy. In this letter, he offers a rationale for their action by pointing out hard facts about the world that African Americans experienced. He spoke truth to power saying things that others were not aware of and most did not want to hear. An example of this is heard in a 1968 speech describing the disparity between what African Americans were told and what "Immigrants from Europe" were given. Here's a short clip of this speaking truth to power only a short time before his assassination.

Play

Speaking the truth about injustice and inequality takes courage. Notice that he is not attacking individuals here. He is actually not begrudging the opportunities the European settlers received as they moved to the land. He is pointing out that they are being given incredible opportunities while African Americans are being removed from the land and being told to figure it out themselves. His efforts were not to diminish the opportunities of others. It was to offer them to all, but the non-courageous imaginations of those who had privilege couldn't see it that way. His speaking truth about the circumstances

was heard as an attack on those with privilege and this kind of speaking takes courage. It can be, as Dr. King's experience demonstrated, extremely costly.

But for me, the greatest courage that Dr. King showed was not in his imagining of a world that could not be seen. It was not in speaking truth to those with privilege. It was in a deep commitment to living a radically different way of being than what those who opposed him could imagine.

In his Letter From a Birmingham Jail, he describes the steps that were involved before any direct action was taken. There were four steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. Collection of the facts allows truth to be spoken. Negotiation is rooted in hope that the reality that is dreamed of could come to fruition. The fourth step, direct action, is meant to put pressure on others to hear the truth and come to the table to negotiate. But the third step is the most courageous of all - self-purification. In that letter, Dr. King describes how this process played out for them collectively before any direct action was taken.

We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" and "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"

They checked their motives and their commitment to acting in ways that did not escalate violence. They refused to respond to evil with evil, but rather to respond to evil with good. Checking their own hearts and committing to this way of being would take more courage than any imagining or truth-telling would.

A vivid example of this kind of courage from Dr. King was on display more than a decade earlier on January 30, 1956. While Dr. King was speaking at an event a man drove up to his house, where Coretta, Dr. King's wife was at home with their seven-month-old baby, Yolanda. This man jumped out, threw an explosive onto their porch and drove off leaving the house badly damaged. Thankfully, Coretta and Yolanda were physically uninjured. Dr. King rushed home when word of the bombing reached him and by the time he arrived an angry crowd was gathering and preparing to go and exact revenge. There, in the shadow of his damaged home, Dr. King called for peace and spoke these words:

“We believe in law and order. Don’t get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. Love them and let them know you love them. I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. If I am stopped, our work will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us.”

At that moment, Dr. King was in the midst of a Civil Rights battle that had involved centuries of abuse and oppression and there seemed to be no way out of it. At that moment, Dr. King had a wife and daughter who had very nearly been killed because he had *peacefully* been advocating for equality. At that moment, he stood in the debris of a home that lay devastated by an act of violence towards him. At that moment, he had the power of an angry and violent crowd who had been pushed over the edge at his disposal, waiting for him to point them in a direction to unleash a compiled centuries of pent-up sorrow, frustration, hopelessness and anger. All the powers of the world were pushing for reaction and revenge. Instead, Dr. King took the greatest step of courage one could take at that moment and chose to love. And he chose the courage to call others to lay down their weapons and anger and fear and to pick up love. Undergirding all the dreams and all the speeches and all the truth-telling was a deep commitment to courageous love – even if...even when it cost him his life.

In light of all of this, I’ve been giving some thought to our ideas of power. Dr. King was never elected to political office. He used no weapons of violence, even when faced with those with political power and state-sponsored weapons of violence being used against him. Instead, he held up imagination, truth, and love as his weapons of choice. Ultimately, his posture cost him his life, but it did not cost him his voice or his cause. Had he led his army of revenge seekers in 1956 from the front porch of his house in search of retributive justice, Dr. King would have gone down in history as a minor footnote and the movement he was a part of may have stalled out. Instead, as others join in the work of justice, it continues to roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

As we live in our world today, what does courage look like for us? Does it look like yelling louder than others on Social Media? Does it look like opposing

measures that are designed to protect the vulnerable, but cause us inconvenience? Does it look like correcting every choice of words that offends us? Or does it look like embracing and sharing the imagining of a world that is beyond what we can presently see - an upside-down world where the last shall be first, where humility and servanthood is the way of power, and where love wins. Does it look like fostering anger at those we don't like and doing whatever we can to defend our rights or does it look like the way of Jesus - dying daily, taking up the cross and following him? Does it look like passive ignorance of injustice and brokenness in the world or does it look like seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God?

Dr. King is an example of imagination, sacrifice, and love, but he is not the first example and he is not the greatest example. His example ultimately points us to the greatest example of this - Jesus. The one embraces us with his love and invites us to follow.

Transition Music

As we go, remember that everything is online for the time being. Keep up with us at www.covenantchurch.ca for any and all events. Our board has a meeting tonight and we welcome your prayers for us.

Most importantly, be aware of some of the stuff going on with the people in our Covenant Family. Be praying for Dee as she has surgery today. And, if you did not see the message about it, Fran McNally passed away on Sunday after a short, but aggressive battle with lymphoma. Be praying for her family and all of her friends who are grieving.

Lord God, help us to maintain a conviction and an imagination that recognizes that the pain and struggles of our world are *not* the end of the story or the ultimate story. Help us to be people of hope in and for the life to come and may that hope bear fruit in our present life. May it be a comfort to the weary and worn and grieving. May it inspire courage in the afraid. May it open us up to hearing truth as we are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. And as we seek first your kingdom may your love grow deeply in us and overflow to all with whom we engage. Amen.