

On the Celebration of Martin Luther King Jr, January 18, 2015
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Tomorrow is.....? Martin Luther King Jr. Day - a national holiday. There'll be marches in his honor, there's an event here at 1pm that promises to be quite remarkable....but you all know that.

So here are some questions (which, unless you're name's "Dick Hall" you should feel free to answer!:

1. Brown vs. the Board of Education? 1954
2. What year was the Montgomery Bus Boycott? 1955
3. How about the Civil Rights Act? 1964
4. Voting Rights Act? 1965
5. How about the Marches on Selma (there were 3)? 1965
6. MLK jr's assassination? 1968

Most people point to the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement - Brown vs. the Board of Education laid the ground work.

Can you name some of the people who led the Civil Rights Movement? MLK jr. obviously; and Rosa Parks. But who else? Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis, Malcolm X, Sure, we recognize those names. How about Viola Luzzio, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, William Lewis Moore, Rev. Bruce Klunder, Rev. James Reeb? All white, many ordained; Jonathan Myric Daniels was an Episcopal seminarian. All murdered standing up for Civil Rights.

Lots of segments of U.S society participated in the Civil Rights movement -The American-Jewish community was the largest single group but people of faith were by far the largest segment of the U.S. population - in addition to Jews, Mainline Protestants - Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, UCC – and Roman Catholics marched and worked and supported and died for Civil Rights.

If he were alive today, MLK Jr. would be the first to say “don't just focus on me!” He was the standard-bearer for the Movement; he was it's most eloquent spokesman; he was one of its greatest organizers; but he was not The Movement, he was simply the central figure in just that - a MOVEMENT.

So what else was going on starting in the mid 50's and early 60's? I mentioned it last week in connection with the Baptismal Covenant. Remember this quote?

“The 1960s was a time when theologians became aware of the bankruptcy of so-called ‘classical theology.’” Those who resisted the new Book of Common Prayer reflected “a nostalgia for a classical theology which many theologians know has not been viable for almost two hundred years.” He said that the need for a new liturgy was “a question of truth for our time.... The task that lies before us is to show how in fact [how we worship is actually the same thing as what we believe] and to rewrite our theology books in the light of our liturgy.”

We began revising our worship materials in the early '60's - as did many denominations. We started to have really serious conversations about ordaining women as priests in the 1960's - other denominations had done so already in the 50's.

The same is true with the social policy and theology of pretty much all the Churches except the conservative evangelical Churches.

In 1963 the Roman Catholic Church began the Second Vatican Council – it was a radical transformation of the Roman Catholic Church - not just worship, everything. Everything.

So the Civil Rights Movement is part of a bigger picture of cultural change, not just something which we now remember once or twice a year associated with one man (great though he may have been). It's face was - rightly - the injustices done to so many of the citizens of this nation because of the color of their skin.

But – or perhaps “and” – it was part of a bigger picture of change, cultural, change, that touched not just individuals, not just groups, but institutions; not just the secular but also the religious.

The Civil Rights Movement marked and marks the beginning of a pattern of change so sweeping that we still haven't seen it's end not its full extent.

History tells us that when such dramatic, widespread, all-encompassing change happens there is push-back. Those who were in positions of power, or who want to be in positions of power, or want the world to be unchanged and unchanging - in part because they're doing pretty well, thank you very much - or perhaps because an uncertain future is less attractive than a certain past – will push back, will try and undo what has been achieved.

When we introduced our Book of Common Prayer in 1976 there was a very powerful push-back from those who didn't want it - in part, I suspect, because of what it represented - remember that quote I mentioned. “NO” to women. And that meant, too, “NO” to any other minority who might really be a majority and thus be a threat.

Same with Gays and Lesbians.

Same with any change that represents a threat.

The struggle isn't over. The struggle continues. The struggle for Civil Rights - as Ferguson MO, and Staten Island, and so many other places where black men die at the hands of white policemen reminds us - the struggle continues.

The struggle for the full, and equal inclusion of women, and gays, and lesbians, and - whatever sub-dominant group you can think of - the struggle continues..

And the world – our world – continues to change, as it has done since the end of World War II; how seductive to want to retreat into the halcyon days of yore, when all was well with the world!

But change is happening and we can't stop it. In fact, we shouldn't stop it. It is the way we grown

as human beings and as communities. It is a growth in human understanding and consciousness that holds much promise for all of humanity - birth pangs, if you will.

Rather than trying to stop, or divert, what's happening, we as Christians are called to do the opposite - to act as the mid-wives of this new identity that's being birthed; to embrace it, nurture it, help it to grow among us. It is the future, and we can't stop it, so why waste the energy in trying.

Tomorrow, I invite you to come to the MLK Jr. Day celebration - hear the history but hear, too what one young woman - representative of our next generation - is doing to combat the very negative attempts to undo the work that so many worked for, and work for; the work that some have died for.

And when you come, don't think of it as a history lesson about something started and finished in the past; think of it as a rallying cry; the work is not over, the work goes on. As Jesus continually reminded his followers, none of us are truly free unless all of us are free. So pick up the standard and join the struggle, because it's the struggle for all humanity; its our struggle, its our hope, its our dream.

