



Grace Cathedral Vigil Remarks

Monday, July 11, 2016

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One of the great mysteries of humanity is our inclination to come together in times of crisis. This evening, Bishop Marc Andrus and Dean Malcolm Young have brought us together to reflect upon the horrific violence that has plagued our nation these past days, weeks and months, but more importantly, to challenge us, as people of faith, to rise to the occasion and offer a fitting response rooted in our collective rich spiritual traditions...for this we are thankful.

Two crises, twenty-seven years ago, our City's homeless crisis and the devastating Loma Prieta earthquake, in a like way brought religious leaders together and enlisted a response, in this case, to feed and shelter the homeless, prepare for disasters and offer up a unified voice of faith on the most pressing issues challenging our City...and thus, the SFIC, as we know it today, was born.

But the question is begged, was there no interfaith cooperation in our City before the formation of the SFIC? History is punctuated with crises. It is in the DNA of communities of faith to emerge and offer a prophetic voice at those critical moments. The immense crisis in history, then, bringing together religious leaders, was inspired by the tireless and charismatic voice of Civil Rights Martyr the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Here in San Francisco, in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, before there was the San Francisco Interfaith Council, faith leaders from every tradition came together, through the Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns to proclaim, with a unified and prophetic voice, the Almighty's call for freedom and equality for all people.

SFIC Founder and Past Chair Rita Semel was among those who took a leadership role in that movement and courageously marched arm-in-arm with our sisters and

brothers of color down Market Street, when such direct actions were neither popular nor safe.

Civil Rights are Human Rights. They are in the very DNA of communities of faith and are no less the spiritual inheritance of the SFIC. The SFIC's commitment to advancing Civil Rights in our City is actualized in the leadership and organizing role we've taken over the years to convene San Francisco's Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Celebration March and Interfaith Prayer Service. This powerful event is our City's official annual observance and brings together over 15,000 souls from throughout the Bay Area to honor Dr. King's message by making it meaningful to the challenges facing our City today.

Symbolically marching and offering prayer are central elements to the significance of that day... and yet, realizing the significance of this moment in history, in which we find ourselves, and the need to do more, on February 12th of this year the SFIC partnered with the University of San Francisco to convene a half-day symposium, where scholars, activists and faith leaders examined the historic role of faith communities in the Civil Rights Movement, assessed the current state of the movement, with a particular focus on new voices at the table, and explored ways that faith communities can reclaim their prophetic voice as the Civil Rights movement looks to the future.

In his keynote reflection, Diversity Visiting Professor and Scholar at the University of San Francisco Dr. Clarence Jones, Dr. King's legal counsel, speechwriter and confidant quipped, "The problem of being alive for so long is that you see too much." He went on to remind attendees that in the early 1980's, when young gay men were dropping dead of a mysterious disease that was yet to be named... and President Regan and his administration failed and refused to respond, an organization called ACT UP emerged; these vocal activists showed up and shouted out at places they were not welcome, they disturbed and made people's lives uncomfortable...and thank God that they did...for had they not, more people would be dead today and we, as a nation, would not have made the incredible medical advancements that have saved the lives of countless HIV and AIDS victims ever since. In saying this, Dr. Jones sought to translate to an overwhelmingly white audience the purpose and need for today's "Black Lives Matter" movement.

Students of history will remember that in April of 1963 the same Clarence Jones took scribbled bits of newspaper and toilet paper he had smuggled out of Dr. King's Birmingham jail cell and passed them to Wyatt Tee Walker, Dr. King's chief of staff. In turn, Walker handed them to his secretary, Willie Pearl Mackey King, so she could type them up. Little did she know that she was typing up a letter that would challenge the cultural acceptability of racial prejudice, the "Letter From Birmingham Jail."

Each year at the SFIC's MLK Day Interfaith Service, a passage of that letter is read. Bishop Marc has read and commented on the assigned passage. For our purposes

here this evening, I am going to ask your indulgence and allow me to read a different portion, a brief paragraph that deserves our attention at this critical moment...a paragraph that might and should make us uncomfortable as, I believe, it is at the heart of the racial strife and tension we are experiencing in our nation today, 53 years after being penned.

Here, Dr. King says, ""I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is... the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension... who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

I ask you sisters and brothers, are we not all complicit in perpetuating this indictment. It seems a lot easier to point a finger at the other, the police, elected officials, even one another. And yet, we are reminded that when we point the finger of accusation at the other, there are three fingers pointing back at us.

If we, as people of faith, are truly committed to reclaiming our prophetic voice at this critical moment in today's civil rights movement, if we are truly committed to standing on the shoulders of those who struggled and sacrificed before us, we must honestly look in the mirror and question the depths of our own sincerity and motivations.

Our Council is taking a direct action to help each and every one of us answer those questions and realize our potential as instruments of peace in this great City of St. Francis. Working together with the Office of Diversity at USF and the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, the SFIC will be offering "Implicit Bias Training," to our City's congregation leaders and those in our communities of faith who seek to carry the mantle of civil rights and make a difference in our time. This is the same "Implicit Bias Training" undergone by our City's law enforcement officers, government officials and department heads. If confession is truly good for the soul, this promises to be an exercise in self-reflection that will enable us to plumb the depths of our own consciences and come to terms with our own inherent prejudices before attempting to authentically speak truth to power. In the words of that great interfaith anthem, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Dear friends, I do not believe that it is an understatement to say that we find ourselves at a profound turning point in history. The torch of trust is being passed and

the expectation that we keep that torch bright, so that the injustices of inequality may be exposed and eradicated, could never be greater. To lift the weight of this great burden of history, we must appreciate and realize that no one congregation or community of faith can achieve alone what can be accomplished when we join forces and work together. In this sacred place and at this sacred time, let us with fervor accept the invitation to recommit our best selves to actively work together to create that more just, equal and colorblind reality for our City, Nation and the generations to come.

Thank you.