



Martin Luther King Jr. addresses the crowd during the August 1963 March On Washington at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. *Central Press/Getty Images*

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Martin Luther King Jr.: Seeking justice through love



Douglas Kindschi

Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

“Let Justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

This quote, from the Hebrew prophet Amos, was a favorite used by Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

This past weekend, we again remembered him for his commitment to nonviolence and his leadership in the civil rights movement. He was fond of quoting Amos and the other prophets, as he saw his own efforts as similar to the Jewish struggle for freedom from slavery in Egypt.

He used the quote earlier in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail in April 1963. One year prior to his death, he spoke to more than 3,000 people in Riverside Church in New York City when his concern for justice expanded to the cause of peace in view of the carnage of the Vietnam war. He concluded his speech with, “If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

In his final speech, the evening before he was assassinated, we again hear the prophet’s words calling for justice. King ends by evoking the image of the Exodus and Moses seeing the Promised Land while not actually getting there. He concludes, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”

The Muslim leader, Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, finds inspiration in the life of King, a Christian who in turn was inspired by Gandhi, a Hindu. Patel points out that King did not reject Gandhi because he was of a different religion but instead “sought to find resonances between Gandhi’s Hinduism and his own interpretation of Christianity.” King had referred to Gandhi as “the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force.”

The cause of justice goes beyond racial division to include also religious division. Some would see religious diversity as a cause for prejudice and even hatred. Just as King reached out to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, we cannot afford to let religious differences create separation and exclusion, and even violence. Patel paraphrases one of King’s principles: “The world is not divided between black and white or Christian and Muslim, but between those who would live together as brothers and those who would perish together as fools.”

In a recent publication of King’s prayers, we read the following:

“O God, we thank you for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. We call you different names: some call you Allah; some call you Elohim; some call you Jehovah; some call you Brahma; some call you the Unmoved Mover. But we know that these are all names for one and the same God. Grant that we will follow you and become so committed to your way and your kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a brother- and sisterhood, that we will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where men and women will live together as brothers and sisters and respect the dignity and worth of every human being. In the name and spirit of Jesus. Amen.”

In his talk at Riverside Church, King called for a revolution of values leading to a loyalty to all of humanity, one that “lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation.” He called for an “embracing and unconditional love for all mankind.” By love, he did not mean some sentimental effort but a “force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.” He called this love “the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.”

He went on to refer to the “Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about the ultimate” that was summed up in the New Testament epistle of John: “Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8)

King admonishes, “We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation.”

In King’s speech upon receiving the Noble Prize for Peace in 1964, he told of a famous novelist who had died. Among his papers was a list of suggested story plots. They included one where a deeply divided family inherits a beautiful mansion, but on the condition that they have to live together.

King continues: “This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a big house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterners and Westerners, gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Muslim and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other.”

Let us live out King’s commitment to racial and religious unity as we seek to remember his example and teaching about the power of love, reinforced by the deep values in all of our religious traditions.

interfaith@gvsu.edu