

Thoughts on Economic Justice from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Throughout his life, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced a philosophy that sought to include every person. He was persistent in his vision of a country united under the banner of justice, love, and hope. For that vision, he found himself threatened with terrorist-style actions. During his sermon entitled “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool,” as quoted in the collection *A Knock at Midnight*, he spoke of being unable to sleep after receiving a late-night call threatening to bomb his Montgomery home. While contemplating whether to go on or give up, he bowed his head at his kitchen table that night, “[a]nd it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’”

The justice, love, and hope the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about included a holistic view for the whole of the earth. He felt strongly that we should be concerned with those in other countries by sharing of our excess. He said:

We have our barns, and every day our rich nation is building new and larger and greater barns. You know, we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food. But I want to say to America, I know where you can store that food free of charge: in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God’s children in Asia and Africa and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry tonight.

Economic Justice

Dr. King’s holistic view included economic justice. While he continued to emphasize justice, love, and hope through non-violent protest, he began to focus more on justice by addressing economic inequality. After working for years through sit-ins, he found that the economic plight of African-Americans helped segregation to continue. That caused him to propose a “War on Poverty” that would seek to tackle the growing disparity in incomes amongst African-Americans and other ethnic groups.

It’s all right to talk about heaven. I talk about it because I believe firmly in immortality. But you’ve got to talk about the earth... It’s even all right to talk about the new Jerusalem. But one day we must begin to talk about the new Chicago, the new Atlanta, the new New York, the new America.



“Even though the President [Johnson] said today that we have never had it so good, we must honestly say that for many people in our country they’ve never had it so bad. Poverty is a glaring, notorious reality for some forty million Americans. I guess it wouldn’t be so bad for them if it were shared misery, but it is poverty amid plenty. It is poverty in the midst of an affluent society, and I think this is what makes for great frustration and great despair in the black community and the poor community of our nation generally.”

Dr. King grew anxious as resources for the war in Vietnam threatened the War on Poverty. As he saw increasing amounts of money spent on war and bombs and siphoned away from helping those in large cities, he said, “The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Viet Nam explode at home....”

The Current Picture

To be sure, great strides have been made. Overall poverty is down since the 1960s and improvements in health care quality have assured longevity to many people. However, poverty rates are rising for the first time in ten years. And access to that health care is not equal for all people. When we look at the figures, a bias becomes clear, African-Americans make up 22.7 percent of those in poverty, despite being only 11 percent of the population. Of the 39.4 million people in the U.S without health insurance, 16.4 percent are African-American and 30 percent are Latino.

What You Can Do to Keep Dr. King’s Legacy Alive

- Urge your Congressional Representative and Senators to increase the minimum wage. Go to www.nicwj.org and click on “Support Minimum Wage Increase” to send letters (or get drafts for ideas).
- Hold a worker rights training in your congregation or agency.
- Pray for low-wage workers and unemployed workers.

Sources

- Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare.* James Cone. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991.
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- Conversation with Martin Luther King.* Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. New York: Penguin Books, 1991. pp. 393-409.

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