

COMMEMORATION OF THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING'S
MARCH ON WASHINGTON

The New Testament Perspectives on Racial and Social Justice
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Thank the Baha'i Community of Bethesda, for hosting this commemoration of Dr. King's March on Washington. It is an honor to have been asked to share some thoughts on racial and social justice perspectives from the New Testament.

I want to compliment my friend and colleague, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, for his insightful remarks and for being someone who not only talks the talk, but walks the walk.

I want you to know that the reference to "Old Testament" concerns me because the New Testament would not exist apart from Hebrew scripture. Jesus as a messianic Jew was well-schooled in Hebrew scripture from which he and his followers borrowed very heavily. It may help persons from other faiths to know Christian services typically follow lectionary readings from Hebrew and the New Testament in every worship service.

It's not surprising therefore that what is commonly known as the **State of Union Message** by Jesus is clearly grounded in the prophetic tradition of his Jewish education. The context is Jesus being baptized and going straight into the desert for 40 days to commune with God and discern the nature of his ministry. Here are his first words recorded in the gospel of *Luke 4:18-19*:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It's obvious why he was controversial and when pressed to explain what was most important, he replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (*Matthew 22:37-40*)

In other words, our love of God and neighbor are inextricably connected. This central theme in the New Testament is illustrated in many different ways.

For example, in *Matthew 5:23-25* Jesus says: "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother (or sister) has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your (sister or) brother; then come and offer your gift.

Jesus is best known for using parables about the kingdom of God that today may be summarized as no justice – no peace, stand up and speak out, and celebrate the richness of our diversity in the bonds of love.

Examples are the parable of the **Good Samaritan** in which Jesus is being challenged to define who is the neighbor they should care for, and he describes how the respected priest and corporate executive prove not to be a neighbor because they pass by a victim on the road. The good neighbor turns out to be of a race, class and faith tradition who is despised by those Jesus is addressing, because he stops and cares for the fallen victim.

Another is known as the **Workers in the Vineyard** in which the owner comes out early in the morning to enlist workers for the day. He subsequently returns for workers another four times. The last time is 15 minutes before closing and everyone is paid the same wage, which was a living wage for that day.

The parable of the **Sheep and the Goats** is the most challenging because in it the righteous who attend worship services every week and sincerely seek to fulfill religious principals are shocked to learn they are damned to hell.

On the other hand, those who never attended worship nor presumed to fulfill religious principles (may never have meditated nor practiced Yoga) are shocked because they are assured of eternal life.

The critical difference is found in actively caring for the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner.

The parables are all descriptions of divine justice. In them Jesus illustrates in everyday terms what it means to live within the kingdom of God. For him the kingdom of God is within us, it's here and now for those who share his consciousness of the love and sense of unity he shares with the divine.

In the gospel of John, he prays “...for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one...just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe...and may be brought to complete unity.”
(John 17:20-23)

Lest there be any doubt about our capacity to experience such unity and to establish his sense of justice – listen to these words of encouragement:
“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.” *(John 14:12-1)*

Moving from the gospels to the epistles of the New Testament we find multiple references to the bond of unity and the power of divine love.

“For he is our peace, who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility and made us all one.” Claims the Apostle Paul. *(Ephesians 2:14)*

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God (seen) in Christ Jesus our Lord.” *(Roman 8:35-39)*

It is this **vision of justice** and the **unifying power of love** that made the first March on Washington possible. Those who organized it were being persecuted, every one of them knew loved ones and colleagues who had died in the struggle for justice, and their lives were on the line.

They came together under the banner of jobs and freedom. The “I Have a Dream” address by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was above all a call to end racism. That was 57 years ago and after all the centuries of hearing Hebrew and Christian scripture, it is reasonable to ask whether or not it's working, whether or not we should be taking these texts seriously.

I found my answer in helping to plan the first initiative of Martin Luther King in the North at the school on the end of our street in Roxbury, Massachusetts.

I was among those responsible for the security of one whom we have come to affectingly call brother Martin. It was after midnight and we had gone over and over our plans. Then Andy Young, who was the front man for such engagements, asked us to remember the press were present less to record his words than his assassination.

If there were to happen, we were to unlink our arms and let those with the press badges through to do their work. I will never forget that night nor others like it in which we were reminded that we could not trust the police and were entirely dependent upon **unarmed truth and unconditional love**.

Once this consciousness becomes part of you – it never leaves.

Once the lessons of sacred texts and the vision of the more beloved community, in which every basic human need is met and every human right respected, become part of you – one no longer questions its viability.

Rather one is blessed to be associated with kindred spirits who yesterday in pouring rain provided food boxes to thousands of our neighbors, who last week staffed hubs providing Covid-19 tests together with Census and voter registration, who shared in Candid Conversations on White Privilege, who declared that Black Lives Matter, who this coming week will finish plans for a town hall with Superintendent Smith and his management team including ways faith communities may provide tutoring, childcare and WIFI; and others will further our work on community policing, finalize mental health webinars and participate in a forum on compassion fatigue.

This afternoon we gather to commemorate Dr. King's March on Washington and reaffirm our essential unity as sisters and brothers of one human family.

What we discover as we do these things is that the beloved community is real, the kingdom of God is within and among us all, and the power of love is proving to be far greater than all forms of loveless power. So be it. Amen.