

**Living Wisdom**  
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**Readings**

1 Corinthians 12:4-14

**4** There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. **5** There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. **6** There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. **7** Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. **8** To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, **9** to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, **10** to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. **11** All these are the work of one and the same Spirit... **12** Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. **13** For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **14** Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

from the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.

We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.

We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

## Sermon

Martin Luther King, Jr., is remembered by all too many of us through the foggy rear view mirror of hindsight for his soaring rhetoric and great successes – the Montgomery bus boycott early in his civil rights career, the March on Washington much later.

We have too easily forgotten how hard was his road and often how harsh, for example, was the criticism of King, and not only by southern white racists. King was wiretapped by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, which strived mightily to discredit him as a communist, as anti-American. Even liberal whites and moderate African Americans sometimes asserted King was too radical, particularly as he began to speak out against the Vietnam War and then as he embraced poverty, whether of blacks or whites, as an issue.

And as the 1960s wore on he was taken to task by the rising leaders of the Black Power movement, who believed that King's strategy of non-violence was ineffective and fed into racial stereotypes.

Yet King kept on.

I've been talking about wisdom this month, most especially what is called the "perennial wisdom." Was King a wise man?

Last week I talked about wisdom as a tool for navigation through our lives, and I suggested the distinction between practical wisdom and perennial wisdom. I noted that practical wisdom comes in many varieties depending on the task at hand: whether carpentry or surgery, teaching or parenting, leading a business meeting or leading an athletic team. Whereas the perennial wisdom that affirms the unity of life, that affirms that we are each singular manifestations of one reality, called God, Tao, Universe... the perennial wisdom embraces and transcends all the practical varieties.

Clearly Dr. King was a master of the practical wisdom of leading a movement and of moving a congregation or gathering with his rhetoric. Was he also a master of, or at least disciple of, the perennial wisdom?

I would affirm that he surely was, though it is unlikely he ever used those words. But let me remind you of words he did use, words we heard in the reading: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Well, for me this is a beautiful metaphor for the perennial wisdom. I love these words... "an inescapable network of mutuality." "Inescapable": in other words this is the way the world is, the universe is. King was affirming that it is not a choice to be part of this "network of mutuality." Rather, the choice we have is this: How will we behave, how will we live, within this network of mutuality, this single garment of destiny?

Now, we of course know of some of King's imperfections as a human being. Wisdom is not the same thing as perfection. But was he motivated in his work and in his

life primarily by a selfless desire for justice, motivated by love – and therefore motivated by a realization that only through peaceful means can peaceful ends be attained?

We heard his words. Did he live up to these words? Or at least strive mightily to live up to these words? Did he exhort others in the same direction?

To these questions, we can only answer yes, and yes, and yes again.

Among other things, time after time when some entreated him to abandon non-violence in the face of violence from opponents, he refused. Time after time he reached out to opponents, trying to bring them in, striving to raise everyone up to that higher plane of the single garment of destiny.

He did have dark moments, times that challenged his resolve beyond what most of us could endure. In 1966, for example, as the civil rights movement seemed to be fragmenting, as support from the otherwise liberal press was often lukewarm at best, King found himself in the midst of what he called a convergence of “valley moments” (as described in *At Canaan’s Edge* by Taylor Branch). You had reporter Mike Wallace asking King, “Don’t you find that the American people are getting a little bit tired, truly, of the whole civil rights struggle?” You had *The New York Times* publishing a series of articles under the head, “Civil Rights: A Turning Point – Support for Negro and His Problems Found to Wane.” “How deep,” the piece asked, “does white disengagement go, and where does it leave the Negro?”

And so on.

In the face of such times, King sometimes got despondent and exhausted – he was human after all. In 1966 in Grenada, Mississippi, for just one example. King and others were there following the violent beating of African American children who were integrating local schools. On the morning that King and others were to help guide and protect children going to school, King could not rouse himself from bed. He asked Andrew Young to see if Joan Baez, who was also there, could come and sing for him and for them all. She came and sang a traditional spiritual which includes these words:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow  
I’m travelling this wide world alone

I’ve heard of a city called Heaven  
I’m trying to make it my home.

King then rose and went out into the hostile streets of Grenada and helped to escort two young African American girls to their school. For him, or so it seems to me, whatever heaven might mean after we die, here in this life we make heaven our home through acts of love as we seek justice and freedom for all. That is perennial wisdom... lived.

Two years later, in the early spring of 1968, in the midst of disputes within the civil rights movement and within his own inner circle as King led the campaign for justice for the sanitation workers in Memphis, he lashed out at some of his closest advisors and colleagues, accusing them, as Branch reports the interchange, of using the movement that “had made them... to promote themselves.”

In response to King’s anger, Jesse Jackson urged, “Doc, doc, don’t worry! Everything’s going to be all right.” King replied, shouting, “Jesse, everything’s *not* going to be all right! If things keep going the way they’re going now, it’s not SCLC but the whole country that’s in trouble. I’m not asking, ‘Support me.’ I don’t need this. But if you’re so interested in doing your own thing that you can’t do what this organization’s structured to do, if you want to carve out your own niche in society, go ahead. But for God’s sake, don’t bother me!”

Now, was King himself immune from the pressures of ego and self-aggrandizement? Probably not altogether. But as this interchange makes really clear, he knew how things *should* be, he knew that for the civil rights movement to succeed, the small self of ego identity had to be put aside in the interest of the whole, that single network of mutuality. That, too, is perennial wisdom *lived*.

Having said all this, I want to affirm that wisdom of any variety, including the perennial wisdom, is not just for those we name as the great souls among us: A Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, or Kenyan environmental justice leader Wangari Mathai.

No, it is for all of us. Our problem might be that when we use that great big word “wisdom” we sell ourselves short, thinking it would be hubris to claim it for ourselves.

But the perennial wisdom as *lived* can be boiled down to pretty basic terms accessible to all of us. As you may recall from my sermon a couple of weeks ago, Aldous Huxley, compiler of the now classic anthology *The Perennial Philosophy*, near the end of his life said that he was a little embarrassed that after forty-five years of research and reflection the best he could offer by way of advice was to be a little kinder.

But to be a little kinder is maybe the best advice we can receive, particularly when we remember that “kind” has the same root as “kin” – reminding us that our kindness, to one another, to all life, to the web of life, grows from our experience of kinship with one another and with all life. And that is the perennial wisdom.

Conversely, as I also reminded us earlier this month, kindness is at the same time, a path to an *experience* of that perennial truth that we are all knit together, one life, one inescapable network of mutuality.

Kindness which is manifest not only in small acts of caring and words of support, but in our work for justice: in relation to rights for any marginalized group; in relation to economic inequality; and in our work to save endangered species and to ameliorate

climate change, the most immediate effects of which are felt by those who are already living on the edge in our world.

So it is *all* about *living the perennial wisdom* that affirms the unity of life. And we can *all*, each in our own however modest way, live this wisdom.

Now, Huxley closes his anthology with a chapter titled “Contemplation, Action, and Social Utility,” reminding us that though our society and our world praises *action* as the highest end of human life, the perennial philosophy affirms that “the end of human life is contemplation” and that “action is a means to that end.”

This said, as the medieval monk and mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “What a man takes in by contemplation, that he pours out in love.”

Or as Huxley put it, when it comes to the spiritual life, “Income must balance expenditure.” And “This means that the life in which ethical expenditure is balanced by spiritual income, must be a life in which action alternates with repose.”

In other words, the repose of contemplation, the insights and experience of contemplation, serve action, and conversely action in the spirit of kindness and love serves to deepen our contemplation and our realization that we are indeed all bound together in one garment of destiny.

Remember how often Jesus is said to have retreated to pray in the midst of his life of healing and teaching? And remember that Martin Luther King, a minister, likewise retreated to pray?

April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated, King spoke at an event in Memphis, concluding with these now famous words, which began with an acknowledgement of threats on his life. Then:

Well, I don't *know* what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. 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 the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've s-e-e-e-n, the promised land. And 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! So I'm happy tonight! I'm not worried about *anything*! I'm not fearing *any* man! Mine eyes have seen the *glo-ry* of the coming of the Lord!

That, to me, is a powerful expression of perennial wisdom, spoken and lived. “God's will”? Putting aside our personal, selfish interest in the service of others, of all life, of the unity of life, of the network of mutuality, the garment of destiny we share.

Which we can each and all do every day, *living wisdom*, even if not on the kind of grand stage or through the ultimate sacrifice of a Martin Luther King.

On the evening of April 4, 1968, as we know all too well, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took a moment outside his room to stand on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis; and he said this to Ben Branch, who, as it had been planned, would be playing the sax at a meeting later that evening: “Ben, make sure you play Precious Lord, Take My Hand... Play it real pretty.”

A moment later shots rang out.

But the example of a courageous soul who lived the wisdom of the ages by his best lights, lived the wisdom while traveling a hard and sometimes dark road, lives on for us today... and for the ages to come.

May we live this wisdom too.

Amen.