

Epiphany 2, Year C
I Corinthians 12:1-11
January 20, 2019
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Tomorrow we observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so far as I know the only national holiday honoring a black American. With our usual efficiency we celebrate it on Monday the 21st, despite the fact he was born on the 15th. But that is OK, we did the same thing to Lincoln and Washington. Because I feel some need to speak to this moment, I decided to spare us all a sermon on the wedding feast in Cana; and besides, some of you do not want to hear me say this story is not historical, so I won't, except I just did. Instead I want to concentrate on our passage from Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, which I believe informs the mission and ministry of The Reverend Dr. King, and helps explain his continuing influence to this day.

St. Paul declares "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." He then writes "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Among those gifts are "miracles" and "prophecy." We now know that King was like all of us a flawed human being, and some of those flaws were serious. Nevertheless what I want to suggest to you today is that King was both a miracle worker and a prophet, and that it was the Spirit of God that inspired him to manifest these two gifts "for the common good." For most of us the idea that King was a prophet is accepted as obvious. Less obvious is the miracle he wrought in American society, so that is the gift I want to talk about this morning.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has written a brilliant book entitled *We Were Eight Years in Power* in which he argues remarkably convincingly that American society was rooted as firmly in the

tradition of white supremacy as it was in the tradition of democracy. Indeed, Coates argues, the two ideas were not contradictory, as is often imagined, but complementary. In his view it was possible to imagine the complete equality of all white people only because there was a permanent underclass of slaves, deprived of all the privileges of citizenship. He cites Jefferson Davis, for example, who while still a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, wrote “White men have an equality resulting from a presence of a lower caste, which cannot exist were white men to fill the position here occupied by the servile race.” White equality, in other words, was rooted in the oppression of Black people. Jill Lapore does not go quite that far in her one volume history of the United States, *These Truths*, but throughout the book she testifies to the importance of institutional racism in the history of our Nation. People argue with Coates about this, but as a person who lived in a tract housing unit in Concord, California from 1963 to 1968 that was not open for purchase by black people and who lives in and loves deeply the state of Oregon that prohibited the entry of black people in its constitution, a prohibition that stayed in place until the Second World War, I am in no position to argue about the pernicious effects of racism, and the benefit my whiteness has bestowed upon me.

Yet, Martin Luther King Jr, took on that whole system of white supremacy and institutional racism and brought about one of the great miracles of world, not just American, history. Through what he termed “non-violent direct action,” King led a movement which became so compelling so powerful, that it shook the very foundations of white supremacy and led white society in the United States to begin for the very first time to cede some of its power and some of its privilege to black people. That is a miracle. It is a miracle that the dominant class, anchored in more than three hundred years of tradition, would agree to begin to dismantle

the very structures that insured its supremacy and to share power with those it had previously refused to admit were even fully human. That struggle is no where near over. Just as slavery gave way to Jim Crow, so Jim Crow gave way to Mass Incarceration, and the creation of laws that a few Nixon administration officials now admit were targeted at urban blacks. More recently, Bill Clinton, in his version of the “war on drugs” has since apologized for what he sponsored as President, realizing, as he recently admitted, the vastly disproportionate effect those drug laws had on Black Americans.

Yet, it is because of the miracle Martin Luther King Jr. brought about that Kevin McCarthy, the House minority leader, had a “serious conversation” with Representative Steven King of Iowa about his place in the Republican Party, a conversation that ended with King stripped of his committee assignments. Representative King was recently quoted as saying “White nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization - how did that language become offensive?” Notice, ala Coates, that Steve King seamlessly equates western civilization with white supremacy. But I will tell Representative Steven King when that language became offensive. It became offensive when Martin Luther King Jr. led this nation to begin a terribly painful critique of itself, a critique that is still much opposed by many in this country but which is ongoing nevertheless. And it is a miracle for Kevin McCarthy and Mitch McConnell to state that this sort of language has “no place in America” just sixty-four years after Emmett Till was murdered by two southern White supremacists who were then acquitted of the crime by a jury who knew perfectly well they were guilty.

What I want to assure you this morning is that this miracle King helped bring about was inspired by the very same Spirit Paul invokes in his letter to the Corinthians, it is a gift of

miracles brought about through the Spirit of God. I say this because this miracle is completely consistent with the entire movement of the Bible from first to last. It is the Spirit that moved Amos to cry for “Justice to flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” It is the spirit that moved Ezekiel to declare “‘All souls are mine,’ says the Lord.” It is the spirit that Jesus incarnated when he met the native Palestinian woman, lowest of the low in first century Palestine, and was overcome by her persistence and so agreed to heal her daughter. It is the Spirit that moved Paul to the realization that in Christ “there is neither slave nor free,” for all are one in God. It is the Spirit, I dare say, that despite everything humans do in pretty much every culture, to split off the acceptable from the unacceptable, continues to inspire people in every generation to offer a different vision, and to manifest that vision in such a compelling fashion that people are changed by it, and so begin, however dimly, to realize that we are all one. It is the spirit of God that does this, and only the spirit of God. Where you see this power at work, in other words, there you see the power of God.

I also believe we need to be clear about the nature of this miracle. For the miracle did not banish the lie of white supremacy from our country; I am not even sure that it decoupled the complementarity Coates finds between white supremacy and the notion of the equality of all white people. But in taking on white supremacy as it was manifested in Jim Crow in the fifties and sixties, and leading this nation to repudiate the laws that had institutionalized the second class status of black Americans, King exposed just how steeped we are as a nation in racism, and began in earnest the critique that has to this point advanced far enough that we could as a nation elect Barak Obama as president. That is a considerable miracle, despite the phenomenon of mass

incarceration that, in another miracle for this day, we are beginning, slowly and haltingly, to dismantle.

No one knows what it will take to complete the miracle and create a society that King as a prophet imagined in his “I have a dream speech.” Indeed, no one knows if that miracle will ever be completed in this country. I have my doubts. Yet, it is the nature of a miracle that no one can see it coming, and no one can predict how it will manifest itself. This is why I tend to see King as more possessed of the gift of miracle than of prophecy, for his prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. But the miracle, that really happened. “We the People” began to look at ourselves differently because of him, and because of him and the Spirit that gave him his gift, the hope of Amos and Ezekiel that a world in which the love of God finally triumphs, continues to live.