

Martin Luther King Day Homily – by Jim Huchthausen

Ninety years ago this coming Wednesday (January 16, 1929), one of our country's eminent leaders was born. We soon celebrate a national holiday to honor the valiant life and accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The institution of slavery was challenged from the very beginning of this country's origins as a blot upon the nation's moral character. It has left an indelible stain on our country's history.

Alex Haley, author of the book *Roots* (1976) traced his ancestry – his family roots - back to 1750. He discovered that his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was Kunta Kinte.

Kunte Kinte was born in The Gambia – a western African country that touches the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1767, Kunta Kinte was 17 years of age.

One day, he ventured into the jungle in search of wood to make a drum for his younger brother, whom he adored. Kunta Kinte heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He began to run. The sound grew louder. Then he was hit on the back of his head and was knocked unconscious.

He would never see his family again.

A couple of days later, Kunta Kinte awoke. He was one of 100-plus Blacks packed like sardines in the bowels of a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

About 25 percent of the people on the ship died: some committing suicide or jumping overboard, some by having a companion strangle him; some from diseases unknown in their native country.

After about three weeks at sea, the ship landed in Virginia. The Blacks were driven to a pen. Wealthy White planters took their place outside, and the auctioning began. Records show that one Thomas Moore bought Kunte Kinte for about \$125, and gave him a new name – Toby.

Kunta Kinte toiled in Moore's fields from dawn to dusk – seven days a week. And he fell in love; with another slave named Kizzy. They soon married.

Then Kizzy was sold to another planter. Kunta Kinte was heartbroken. Meanwhile, Kizzy was repeatedly raped by her new master. Ultimately, she gave birth to a boy who was named George.

Years later, Kizzy heard that Kunte Kinte had died. She temporarily escaped the plantation in search for his grave. She eventually found it – with the name “Toby.” She scratched off the name – and wrote “Kunta Kinte.” She returned to her plantation in tears.

Racism is an unconscionable and reprehensible character trait – especially in any civilized society, supporting the idea that some humans are superior to others, as Jesus so particularly forbade.

This begs questions: Is one born racist? Or is one taught to be racist? Were members of Hitler's Gestapo born to be racists? Or did they learn to be racists? And on and on. Anyone who has studied the subject knows that no one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin, their background, or their religion. People are taught to hate. And if one can learn to hate, then they can also be taught to love.

The Bible mentions four types of love.

1. *Phileo* involves displaying affectionate love for another to make him or her happy. It's where we get the word *filios*, brother.
2. In Greek mythology, *Eros* is the God of Love. *Eros* is a love felt within the body and the mind at once, bringing excitement, elation, and the love of joy.
3. *Storge* refers to familial love; natural affection, such as the love of parents toward their children and vice versa. It is the love among family members.
4. *Agape*, is the highest of the four types of love mentioned in the Bible. It is not a feeling. It is a motivation for action. *Agape* is rooted in the character of God and defines God's immeasurable and incomparable love for humankind, and our obligation to love one another accordingly.

Agape is selfless and sacrificial - it is unconditional. It is humbling ourselves before God and putting others before ourselves.

In the second lesson we heard, the Apostle John refers to *Agape*:

“Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. This is how God showed love among us. This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Child to obviate our sins.”

And so it is. We must live our lives accordingly - with love – with *Agape*.

The North emerged victorious in the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln has gone down in history as one of our greatest presidents; one who put his country above his self-interests.

The slaves were emancipated. They were free at last. Within four years, three amendments were tacked onto the Constitution. The 13th Amendment (1865) abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment (1868) consisted of two important components - (1) the equal protection clause that all people - not only U.S. citizens – must be treated equally. (2) the due process clause – that no one shall be denied life, liberty, or property without due process of law. “All people” meant all people, regardless of citizenship, regardless of anything.

The 15th Amendment (1869) - provided suffrage rights to all men over 21 “regardless of race or previous condition of servitude.” (Women weren’t given suffrage rights until the 19th Amendment; they couldn’t vote until 1920.)

Blacks were free at last. But were they really free? I began a few minutes ago with the story of Kunta Kinte. Whatever happened to his wife’s child, George? He and his new family moved to Henning, Tennessee to begin a new life. In the early 1870s, George walked into the polling place in the small town of Henning. He said to the white registrar, “I come here to register to vote. And I paid my poll tax.” (Very few emancipated slaves had saved enough money to pay the poll tax, thus excluding them from the voting process. George was one of the few.) The White registrar said, “Very good, George.”

Then he handed George a pamphlet. “Now read this,” the registrar said. George reached for the paper - and began to read. “The con sti tu she-on sta staus states th - at all pee ple... people.” George finally stopped.

The registrar finally broke the silence. “Very good, very good, George. I declare that you have passed the literacy test. Now tell me - tell me to me to my satisfaction - in your own words - what you have just read.

Once again, the powerful sound of silence penetrated the room. George was silent. Tears began to roll down his cheeks. Just a few seconds seemed like an eternity.

The registrar finally spoke. “I hereby declare that you failed the ‘Understanding Clause’ of the State of Tennessee. Now, go home. Go home. Go home, nigger.” And George went home.

These rules were known as Jim Crow Laws, passed by Southern white-controlled legislatures to deny the rights of Blacks after the Civil War.

In the 1820s, Jim Crow (a fictitious name) devoted himself to the theater and became famous for painting his face black with shoe polish - and mocking Blacks as he sang and danced. He painted a picture of them as ludicrous savages.

Returning again to the late 1880s - after the Civil War. It was a small town in the South. The family was white. After breakfast, the father told his son, “Hurry up, hurry up. We need to go to the town square. A couple of hundred White males surrounded a plywood platform. Some men hoisted their sons on their shoulders for a better look. Four strong White males forced a Black man, bound hand and foot - onto the platform. They placed a noose around his neck and hoisted him upwards. He struggled to gasp for air. He struggled and struggled; then he died. The men laughed and the boys were excited as they made their way home. One gregarious boy with a big grin on his face ran into his home and shouted to his mother, “Guess what, Mom. Guess what I just saw?”

People are not born racist – they are taught.

The Ku Klux Klan died out in the late 1800s. Then in 1915 a film, *The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith premiered. The silent movie chronicles the relationship of two families in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. The film portrays Blacks as ignorant, mentally deficient sexual predators who rape white women, and it portrayed the Klan as a heroic force in keeping them at bay. *The Birth of a Nation* sparked the revival of the Klan.

Within ten years, the KKK became so bold that in 1925 over 30,000 Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C. Their number included Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black and Fred Trump. Three years earlier in 1922, an attorney from Missouri considered joining the Klan. But decided against it. He was running for a local judgeship in the city of Independence. His name: Harry S. Truman.

Racism persisted in these United States. Little progress was made in civil rights for three decades until the 1950s.

Five days a week, a young seamstress living in Montgomery, Alabama took the city bus to and from work. On December 2, 1955, she was sitting in the “Colored” section of a bus. At one stop, a white man boarded the bus, but all the “White-Only” seats were taken. The bus driver ordered the woman to surrender her seat in the “Colored” section. She refused. A couple of stops later, the police were waiting. They arrested her. For over a year, Blacks boycotted Montgomery’s transportation systems.

Rosa Parks is referred to as “The First Lady of Civil Rights” and “The Mother of the Freedom Movement.” Her action sparked the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. When she died in 2005, she became the only woman in American history to lie in state in the nation’s Capitol.

In the 1960s, many Americans were dedicated to attaining civil rights for all people - activists such as Rev. Ralph Abernathy and Hosea Williams and John Lewis -- presently serving his seventeenth term in the House of Representatives, representing Georgia’s Fifth District -- and many more. And there were those who sacrificed their lives for the cause: Medgar Evers (assassinated in Mississippi in 1963 at age 38). And of course, Martin Luther King Jr.

The Civil Rights Movement gained momentum through the leadership of this young charismatic Baptist minister whose mission was to seek justice through non-violence. He became the leading spokesperson, and dedicated his life to ending racial segregation and discrimination. King used Jesus’ own life as an example of how the priority of love – *Agape* -- could produce greatness, in individuals, and in society. He inspired deep change in an entire nation through moral and spiritual appeal. He painted an indelible picture of what America could be - and what America should be.

His oratory was soaring – his messages were powerful - his imagery was vivid - and his cause was right. He fought for economic equality – employment - full citizenship - and access to safe and affordable housing. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at age 35.

It seemed as though he had many years ahead in which to continue his mission - to lead our country in the right direction; toward equality. But his life was snuffed out on April 4, 1968.

He too was only 38-years-old when he took an assassin's bullet to his head while standing on a motel balcony in Memphis.

Primarily because of King's leadership, the Civil Rights Movement swept across the land, and all the way into the halls of Congress. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a landmark civil rights and U.S. labor law in the United States that specifically outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It constitutionally prohibits unequal application of voter registration requirements, as well as racial segregation in schools, employment, and any public accommodation (like busses). According to this act, all people must be treated equally – all people - not only U.S. citizens. Of course this includes undocumented immigrants ... all people.

The following year, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It reinforced previous laws asserting the rights of racial minorities to vote throughout the country, especially in the South, and officially abolished any and all remaining Jim Crow laws. We know there is still much work to be done to arrest the arrogant sense of entitlement White minorities still force upon our communities.

Martin Luther King once said, "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 - Muslims and Hindus."

King also said, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society." Once again, a "thing-oriented society" - which may be interpreted as a materialistic life style, to a "person-oriented" society, wherein sister- and brotherhood is the primary focus.

Fast-forward to August 2017, one of the ugliest days in recent years. It was an explosive situation, as if a hurricane had swept across the country. The city of Charlottesville, Virginia, not far from where Kunta Kinte was sold, was the scene of a display of racial animosity many of us thought was gone from our society. Hundreds of Neo-Nazi and white nationalist racists converged to confront the peaceful gathering of non-violent civil rights promoters.

Many of the neo-Nazis and White nationalists were dressed in full military garb - camouflage clothing - handguns in their holsters - high military boots –and dozens of bullets in the belts slung over their shoulders. One man jumped into his Dodge pick-up, revved up his engine, threw it into gear, and took aim at the crowd, killing one woman and injuring over a dozen others.

The President was silent. Finally, after two or three days, there came a statement -- quote: "Some of the right-wing violent members may have been bad. But the other side... (meaning the entirely peaceful civil rights demonstrators) they came charging in without a permit and they were very, very violent."

The incident in Charlottesville struck at the heart of American law and justice. It was as if the moral compass of our country had been cast awry.

Soon our leaders pulled out of the United Nations Human Rights Council, whose mission is to review and investigate human rights concerns. The U.N. Human Rights Council was proposed by President George W. Bush in 2006. And still the black cloud of racism, hatred, and discrimination continues to hover over our nation. We know that emphasis should be placed on love – *Agape*, not on hatred and not on violence; but we are far from successful.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5; verses 43-48, the scripture says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” This is Jesus’ message.

If we are to survive as a species, we must learn to live in a world where we can live with one another and not denigrate those with whom we disagree. We must develop systems of government wherein no one is judged ... by the color of their skin, their creed, their socio-economic status, political convictions, or personal opinions. We will have to focus more on people - and not on things - as Martin Luther King said. We will have to live in a world where one may make the most of opportunities to develop character and integrity – without monetary rewards as the top priority. We will have to shape a world wherein all peoples will walk shoulder-to-shoulder with their sisters and brothers; for we are all children of God.

Today, the challenge continues. We are not in a position where complacency is an option. Civil Rights are not a done deal. The fight is not over; it continues. We must forge ahead in the great quest for equality; and we must have faith. America has yet to become the society of which Martin Luther King dreamed.

The date: August 28, 1963. The place: Washington D.C. The size of the crowd: over 250,000 people. It was the largest crowd ever to gather in Washington D.C. Here is a portion of the speech delivered by one of the most efficacious and prolific leaders in American history.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin - but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places plain, and when the glory of the Lord is revealed, all flesh shall see it together.

If America is to be a great nation, this must become true. And so let freedom ring - from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring - from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring - from the curvaceous slopes of California. And when this happens and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, Black and White, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” The dream is still alive. If we love one another, we shall overcome.
