2007-1-14
Seeing What You See, Hearing What You Hear
Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to worship in the free spirit of our forebears,
thus renewing our sense of solidarity
with all our sisters and brothers
who call this small planet "home."
May ours be a house of joyous welcome,
of mutual nurture, humility, and vision. And,

as we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Affirmation

MLK from Trumpet of Conscience 1968

If we are to have peace on earth
our loyalties must be ecumenical
rather than sectional. Our loyalties
must transcend our race, our tribe,
our class, our nation. Because it really
really boils down to this: that all life is
interrelated. We are all caught in an
inescapable network of mutuality.
Whatever affects one, affects all,
indirectly.

Sequence for the Day

The same sky that appears to arch over me
like a huge slate bowl equally arches over the head of an 18-year-old Chaga woman in Tanzania, who is singing right now along with an Arabic pop song on the radio. The nearby peak of Kilimanjaro lassos evening's last purple clouds.

Some of the same oxygen molecules that I am breathing right now were breathed out along with carbon dioxide two weeks ago by a man who lost his legs in a raid on a Kurdish village five years ago. Some of these molecules had earlier risen aloft in water vapor from nearby Lake Van, and before that passed through the gills of fish in that lake.

The same earth on which this building stands
has known many feet, from Shawnee children
hundreds of years ago, to a man named Mark
who once saw President Kennedy in a motorcade forty-five years ago, to the late Ed Slowter who once paced out this lot when it was first purchased.

The fire over there in the chalice works the same
way it always has, as swift oxidation that has always had the power to warm cold hands, or allow Plato to read Homer at night in the original, or even to serve as a metaphor, a symbol of a great human heart who could say with complete conviction, "I have a dream!"

O Silence! The world of time and space is vast,
and everything connects each to the other forever and ever. You, and you alone, can touch sky and earth, past and future, there and here, as the perfect emblem of that inescapable connection. So come now, and join us together in a moment of yes, of yes, of yes.

silence

We do not abandon our lives outside this place
when we gather here, for like a seamless garment, all parts of our lives are one. Thus, we pause to remember those our heart carries, those we miss, those we love, those with whom we struggle. We name their yes, too, in the quiet of our hearts or into the shared air.

naming

Note relates to note now like sun relates to earth, and heart relates to heart. Voice relates to voice now like piano key relates to fingers, and like beauty relates to spirit. Joy relates to joy now as hope relates to love, and love relates to us. For all things are connected in
an inescapable network of mutuality….

Readings for the Day

The First Reading *is from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Lecture. This is not his acceptance speech, which was quite different, and more often published. These excerpts from that lecture, given on December the 11th, the day after he received his prize, were selected out of his magnificent lecture by the late Coretta Scott King, King's wife.*

The misery of the poor in (parts of) Africa and Asia is a shared misery; they are all poor together as a result of years of exploitation and underdevelopment. In sad contrast, the poor in America know that they live in the richest nation in

the world. The poor in our country have been shut out of our minds from the mainstream of society, because we have allowed them to become invisible.

The Second Reading *is a first for me. In recognition of the changes the 21st century is making on our lives, this reading comes, not from a book, but from an internet Blog, consisting of radio scripts often heard on public radio. Krista Tippett is a religious liberal with a great interest in the social justice concerns of people of faith.*
This is a long reading, but I could not find much to cut, just to make it shorter. It will be read by two voices.

Ray: The fact of inner-city poverty and racial isolation often comes to us in the form of statistics. Too often, they make us feel overwhelmed and hopeless. The pictures from New Orleans in the days following Hurricane Katrina broke through that paralysis. Terrible images made many Americans feel outraged by the suffering of those 100,000 people in New Orleans, mostly African- American, who were too poor to evacuate the city and then left to fester in sub-human conditions. Michael Brown, the then-director of FEMA, was quoted as saying, "We're seeing people we didn't know existed."

Wendy: I knew, almost immediately after Katrina, that I wanted to interview David Hilfiker. Several years ago I picked up a small booklet he wrote, *Poverty in Urban America: Its Causes and Cures*. This concise essay laid out with clarity how concentrated centers of poverty and racial segregation came to form in major cities all across this country.

The story as he tells it is straightforward and rich with irony. Some of the federal post-Depression initiatives that lifted many Americans out of poverty made the urban ghetto possible. Later programs, also with fine intentions, followed the same pattern. For example, the Interstate Highway Program connected most of America. But as a side effect, it often divided or decimated the poorest African-American neighborhoods. The problem, as David Hilfiker points out gently and eloquently, is that the same Americans, who were invisible until after the hurricane hit, *have been invisible* for a long time, stranded and isolated even by the march of progress.

Ray: In laying out this basic history, David Hilfiker provides a place to start in engaging some of the questions many of us began to ask in the wake of Katrina: How can scenes of utter need and despair, with mostly African-American faces, be possible in the richest, most powerful democracy on earth? But Dr. Hilfiker provides practical guidance as well, with the personally exacting questions that follow on this new awareness: How did the poor become invisible?

Two decades ago, David Hilfiker and his wife decided to open their eyes and move towards poverty rather than away from it, and with their whole life. He reflects this hour on the challenges he had to face in himself as he did so. He speaks of the pragmatic understanding he has gained of pivotal virtues, such as the mandate to love one's neighbor, and the mysterious idea that the nature of God is revealed in care for the poor.

Wendy: And he makes a helpful distinction between "charity" and "justice." Charity is something, he says, over which we have control and that we do in a profound sense for ourselves. He does not condemn charity, and he considers the work of his life to fall mostly into

this category. But we must also find new ways to engage the structures that make inequities possible and perpetuate them. We need to make charity less necessary.

A first and more manageable step he suggests — and the move that can help us know what structures to change — is relationship, a renewed human connection between richer and poorer people in our communities. Because of the deep segregation that defines our urban centers, middle-class and affluent people have to go somewhere else to know the stories and faces of their poorer neighbors, to recognize them as neighbors in the first place.

Sermon

My father has always loved to tell stories about his life. When I was a kid, no dinner table conversation lasted long without one or two stories about his army days or his growing-up years on Maine Ave. in Detroit. But recently, since he reached his mid-eighties, he tells the stories almost without stop. Not just at supper, but all the time. He repeats them wistfully, yet almost urgently, as if he finally discovered that stories can be a way of understanding the meaning and value of his life. It's almost as if he is standing on a high mountain, overlooking the panoramic landscape below him, and seeing the entire territory of connected fields and lakes and cities making one satisfying whole.

Oh, I have to admit, it's not always easy for my sister and brother and me. He repeats the stories as often as three times a day. And not remembering that he has done so. And many of them are stories we have heard for decades. And when my mother, with kind understanding, says, "Louie, we've all heard that story before," he does not miss a beat, and says, "And you'll hear it again right now," as he clutches your arm to keep you from moving away from the sound of his voice.

Still, in the midst of these ever-repeated stories, this last Christmas, my father told a story that I had never heard before. And it was a surprisingly moving story for me.

This is what he told us. He was in the army during the Second World War, and was stationed in Louisiana. I don't remember the exact name of the base, but it wasn't that far from New Orleans, since he recounted walking down Bourbon Street one night and entering a jazz club there, something that surprised me since there was never so much as a note of jazz in my house growing up.

But to get to New Orleans, apparently, they had to travel through some nearby rural areas. And the poverty he saw there completely shocked him. "They had curtains for doors. That's all. There were no roads, just dirt paths. The houses were shanties, at best, shacks, that looked as if the slightest breeze would blow them over. The people wore rags, had no teeth, and clearly didn't have much to eat. It was a sight I could never get out of my mind. I didn't know America had poverty like that."

From 1944 to 2007 is sixty-three years, yet he could remember every detail he had seen as if it was a video-recording playing in front of his eyes. But what amazed me was his amazement. After all, both my father and I grew up in Detroit, which for a long time has been known to be the poorest large city in the United States, that is, the city with the highest destitute population. And, moreover, my father grew up in poverty himself, such poverty that he was released from the army during the war to go take care of my penniless and ailing grand-parents who had only a few dollars between them and nothing. Yet, the poverty my father saw near New Orleans disturbed even him.

Krista Tippett claims that much of the US had a similar experience of amazement when they witnessed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. No matter who was blaming whom for all the horrific debacles which followed that natural disaster, no one could deny that the destitution in Louisiana was beyond belief. On TV screens, in newspapers, in Time and Newsweek, in the Nation, on the Web, many Americans reeled before images of inconceivable poverty. They heard personal stories of destitution that flabbergasted them. This was not the movies. This was not in some nation they could not even pronounce. This was in the United States of America. Land of suburbs and tree-lined cul-de-sacs. Land of $400,000 condos and lavish shopping malls that look like quaint New England towns. The tattered shreds of New Orleans did not resemble any of that in the least. Yet no one could now deny the reality.

For they saw what they saw. They felt what they felt, after they saw what they saw. And the gap between the haves and have *nots* in this nation could be seen for the canyon it is. In short, the invisible became visible for a time.

Katrina confirmed for the nation that just because it was invisible doesn't mean the poverty hadn't been there the whole while. After all, my father saw it 63 years ago. And it staggered him. Martin Luther King Jr. saw it too, even though he grew up in a middle class family where the fiscal worries were few. But he did live in a part of the world not that far from New Orleans, really, where he could see what my father saw, by just traveling a few miles from his house.

When people in this nation celebrate the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, they most often associate him with what we have come to call "race." Racial tensions. The tearing down of a segregated America. They speak of his differences with Malcolm X, of the place where James Reeb was shot, of Selma, of schools being integrated, and, yes, of his famous "Dream Speech" at the March on Washington.

All this is true, certainly. But all of this is also *inextricably* caught up, fused if you will, with the grand canyon that separates the *haves* from the *have-nots* in this nation. Oh, certainly, King understood that poverty is a scandal everywhere. He clearly mentions the poverty in parts of Asia and Africa. But in his Nobel lecture, he made clear, I think you heard, that it's far more of a

scandal here than in other nations, since *we* prate on about being the richest nation on earth.

Yes, the faces of poverty in New Orleans after Katrina largely revealed their African descent, so there can be no doubt that the issues of an unjust economic reality and the issue of one's ethnic roots are connected. But King knew that the issue of poverty was more complicated than that.

He knew all the realities mentioned in the second reading, such as when Krista Tippet quotes David Hilfiker about highways cutting off the poor from the well-to-do, and about how several well-meaning plans had made things worse, not better. All this is true. Sure.

But here it's important for me to point out again what I've said for the last two years during the sermon I preach on this day, namely, that the racialization of this country had a beginning date, 1675, and that it was an *entirely deliberate creation,* not accidental. And that it's a systemic reality, prejudice plus power, not just prejudicial feelings. And that it had to do, first and foremost, with economic class and the maintenance of economic privilege, not skin color per se. Remember? Poor people of *every skin color* had joined together to overthrow privileged European colonists in Virginia. The fear generated by this so called Bacon's Rebellion led to a series of seminal laws which began to pit poor people of African descent against poor people of European descent and which slowly converted ethnicity into the entirely created, non-biologically rooted, category of "race." In short, the purpose of racializing the United States was to maintain a nation where the poor *of whatever color* could be kept invisible and unseen, thus posing no threat.

Dr. King knew all this when he supported the March on Washington. For the March was not principally a protest about segregation at drinking fountains. It was a protest on behalf of economic justice. It was called, after all, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Poor people often do not have access to work that can take them out of poverty. The destitute who have rags for both clothes and doors have no freedom in this so-called free country. But President Kennedy knew that it would be an embarrassment to this great nation if hundreds of thousands of its own citizens gathered in Washington to protest that they had neither jobs, nor freedom of access to the decision-making bodies of the land. So Kennedy called upon Rev. King and his confrères to cancel the March, since he felt that all the legislation he was working on to change the civil rights profile of this nation could possibly be derailed if hundreds of thousands of citizens could show up to protest. Dr. King must surely have reminded Kennedy that the March had been planned around economic issues since it was first proposed in 1941 by A. Philip Randolph. Randolph's march was to protest the exclusion of the black community from economic opportunities during the war. President Roosevelt felt threatened by such an embarrassing march during War years, and so gave orders to desegregate the defense industry. Randolph

cancelled the March in response. Perhaps President Kennedy thought he could have equal clout.

But he did not. And the March went on as planned. And it was a howling success, despite the harsh criticisms of Malcolm X, and the neutrality of large unions like the AFL-CIO. Because, you see, afterward, Dr. King again met with Mr. Kennedy and Vice President Johnson. Kennedy saw the crowds and heard the speech and was won over in his feeling heart. The president and Vice President, then and there, promised to give their all to the civil rights movement, and to gain economic access for all people of color. Why? Because, as Ralph Abernathy summarized, "the March on Washington established visibility." Exactly. The jobless were no longer invisible, but visible. Seen. Felt.

Yet when Katrina happened, the visibility was a surprise once more. It's as if the March on Washington had never happened. Poverty and joblessness at a catastrophic level, and few noticed until the whole city went under, like some modern day Atlantis.

I know. Tell me. These economic issues seem huge. Insurmountable. Depressing. But I assure you they are not. And the clue is found in Krista's column, where the "one-on-one" relationship is lifted up as the initial, practical, humble and ethical approach to this problem.

Our congregation belongs to the BREAD organization, as most of you know, a social justice organization of ecumenical and interfaith proportions. It's not unique. Such organizations exist all over Ohio…in Toledo, in Youngstown, in Dayton, even in relatively smaller cities like Springfield, down the way. And they exist all over the United States. Including in Boston.

And last Friday, a rabbi named Jonah Pesner came from one such Boston organization, and told a story. It's a story about witnessing poverty first hand, like my father did. But it's a story with a remarkable resolution. Listen.

In the Boston interfaith organization, you will find well-to-do churches and synagogues and less well-to-do churches and synagogues. One particular synagogue, with a great social justice witness in the community, always felt like they it was offering charity….soup kitchens and the like, but not really making a significant dent in the realities that make for soup kitchens. And besides, the issues of many of the people in the synagogue had little to do with poverty…most of the members were well enough off not to worry. But they did have things on their mind. Many of them were middle-aged, with aging parents suffering from baffling health issues, dementia, Alzheimer's, which they could not deal with in their own homes. Their conversations were not about the next paycheck, but about nursing homes, guilt, and their resentment at hearing ever-repeated stories from their ailing fathers. Another congregation within the organization, however, consisted largely of Haitian immigrants who at best were the working poor. And even if some were middle-aged, and had ailing

parents, they mostly talked, not of their parents, but of their next paycheck, which was negligible to say the least. They even worried about their next meal. You see, the only accessible jobs for immigrants from Haiti in the Boston area were in nursing homes and other care facilities for those who have disappeared into Alzheimer's. The pay-scale was so bad in these institutions that even working overtime did not always supply the workers with sufficient rent, let alone nourishing food.

Well, this interfaith organization, just like BREAD, is based on the notion of the "one- to-ones," that is, two people sitting down together and telling their stories, expressing their needs and wants, "surfacing" the issues that really matter to them. A number of you have participated in these "one-to-ones." But perhaps not across class lines. I don't know.

In any case, at one of these interfaith meetings, Jews from the temple, and Christians from the Haitian church sat down and did "one-on-ones" with each other. The people from the synagogue spoke of their issues…ailing, mentally challenged parents in homes. The Haitians spoke of their low-income issues in the nursing homes where they worked. One after another, the people talking realized that they had surprising connections. Many of the Haitians were literally serving the ailing parents of the people from the synagogue. So, fortified with this information, they set about to research…together…the nursing home industry in the Boston area. They found that the low wages in nursing homes actually went against many laws already on the books, but that these laws were not being enforced because the nursing home lobbies contributed a lot to the election larders of winning candidates. So the interfaith organization held a mass meeting, just like we do in BREAD. Hundreds and hundreds showed up. From the synagogue. From the Haitian congregation.

Together, they paid a visit to the Nursing Home Commissioner in Massachusetts. And they presented their findings. The Commissioner was shocked. Embarassed. He saw what they showed him. He felt it in his heart. And he went home to examine his conscience. Within two months, salaries went up, working conditions improved dramatically, and thus, the quality of actual nursing care for the ailing elders also improved. This improvement has continued over the years, due to further meetings, where people who thought they had nothing in common came to realize they had everything in common. And that, to take seriously each other's issues, to show up together, can bring about real and substantial changes. Not miracles or revolutions, but changes at the pace reality allows. Step by step. Slow and steady. The pace of a story like the one Debbie told this morning. Or like the one my father told this Christmas. Stories about real people in real situations which are no longer invisible, and where we see what we see, and feel what we feel, maybe for the first time in our lives, and go from there.

Justice work, economic, or racial, or based in gender or sexual or religious differences, is not as dramatic and as impossible as people sometimes fear, or

like to think. Sometimes, just listening to the story, and allowing that story to join your own story, so as to make a larger story, is all that you need… to begin. And with that beginning, I'll end this sermon.

Offering

This time is offered for those who wish to pay their pledges, or make a gift. It is a time of taking seriously the responsibilities generated by an institution which shelters our visions, our social justice planning, our grieving, our rejoicing, our relationships. The offering will now be given and received, for all of us together make the circle which now we support.

Gloria in Terra

One to one, one to the other.
Real relationships claimed, engaged, named.

Gloria in Terra

The relationship of sky to earth,
of sea to land, of species to species.

Gloria in Terra

The relationship of life to death,
and truth to hope and love to risk.

Gloria in Terra

The relationship of joy to our stories,
and song to our spirit; claimed, engaged, blest.

Gloria in Terra

The glory of the earth is this:
the community which engages,
and transforms itself
along the way into an halleluya people. Amen