



Friends of MLK Davenport, Iowa



MLK CELEBRATION

ST. AMBROSE

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MLK CELEBRATION

(5 min) Introduction "1963 Fear and Injustice"

Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?

"No, baby, no you may not go,
For the Dogs are fierce and wild,
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
Aren't good for a little child."

"But, mother, I won't be alone.
Other children will go with me,
And march the streets of Birmingham
To make our country free."

"No, baby, no you may not go,
For I fear those guns will fire.
But you may go to Church instead
And sing in the children's choir."

"She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
And bathed rose petal sweet,
And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands
And white shoes on her feet."

"The mother smiled to know her child
Was in a scared place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

Ka-Boom!!! (Simulate Sound of an Explosion)

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild,
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick.
Then lifted out a shoe.
"O, here's the shoe my baby wore,
But, baby, where are you?"

The year is 1963, the Baptist church on 16th St. in Birmingham Alabama was just bombed injuring 17 and Killing 4 children. The United States was dominated by the actions of Civil Rights activist and those who opposed them. The War in Vietnam is growing in both human and financial cost. The year was punctuated by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, for many the first President since Abraham Lincoln that embodied the hopes of equality and freedom. The poem, I just read, "Ballard of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall captures the injustice and fear of the times. In fact, according to the Tuskegee Institute; by the year of 1963... 4,739 Lynching were documented since the reconstruction period.

We would learn years later that there were even more that went unreported for fear of reprisals. Take a minute and place yourself in this situation, a family member, a neighbor, a fellow congregation member in your church; is lynched... but for fear of reprisals... **no one reports these murders.**

You see...

For these communities...

There is no justice...

For these communities, there is no Freedom...

And certainly no rule of law.

... *Pause* ...

The dangers of Leadership takes many forms, but it is **this** environment... for which Martin Luther King Jr. must exhibit his leadership. In fact, I would argue that in 1963 King's Leadership led to a pivotal moment in the struggle for civil rights. He was able to evolve his message of non-conformity for Jim-crow laws to include a message of solidarity of all humanity. I would argue that it was King's transformative language in his letter written from a Birmingham Jail that year, that drew inspiration from the gospel of Luke ... the accounting of the "Good Samaritan" and the question known as the Great Commandment,

"Who is my neighbor?"

Untimely, the parable is answered with this simple instruction.

"Love thy neighbor as you love thy self"

The beauty and elegance of Martin Luther King Junior's letter is without directly stating it, he moves the reader through the following thoughts...

As one should not conform to injustice done to themselves, they should stand for injustice done to others.

Hence the theme that brings us together today...

"Injustice anywhere is a Treat to Justice Everywhere"

...

"Love thy neighbor as you love thy self"

The letter intended for white clergy, it urged mercy through involvement in the struggle for civil rights. And King's calculations would prove to be successful, as ultimately millions would come to assist in the civil rights movement.

(8 min) The Symbol of Heroes

I am honored and humbled to have been invited to speak to you today. I am honored because I know the rich history of leaders from this community... Leaders who have made their impact like long-time civil right activists Bill Cribbs and Tom Kelly. I am honored to have served 8 years as this city's as its Assistant to the City Administrator and Affirmative Action Officer; and to have worked with so many amazing people like Vera Kelly, Brenda Drew-Peebles, and Bishop Horton, to name a few.

I am humbled because I understand the importance of this day; in fact, 55 years ago Martin Luther King Jr. was here in this very community delivering the message of heroes and challenging others to step forward. To be here today, knowing that there are so many better qualified to deliver today's message is humbling.

And

For that, I thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Heroes... a person who is admired for great or brave acts or fine qualities, a person who is greatly admired. Martin Luther King Jr. certainly fits this description; However, 55 years ago in this community of Davenport, he told his audience that the "true heroes were the unknown faces of the hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people who were behind the civil rights struggle". In fact, taking his lead, I would argue that MLK day is not just about King's profound legacy, it is also about these other heroes. For this reason, I am going to spend some time speaking about heroes that some of you may not know.

Andrew Goodman

Mickey Schwerner (*sounds like sworn-er*)

James Chaney

Are names that may not ring a bell, right away? Their acts of bravery may not be mentioned at the other MLK celebrations occurring around the nation today. But their contributions are as great as any others. These men... two Jewish Americans, and an African American were murdered for daring to attempt to register disenfranchised black voters. You see, it wasn't the fact that they were murdered, that makes them heroes. It was the fact that they knew that an "injustice anywhere was a threat to justice everywhere", and it was this...

they found as an unacceptable condition; and,

this was... "what motivated them" to accept these dangers.

That is what made these men heroes.

King's Birmingham letter mobilized tens of thousands to accept the personal dangers of non-violence protest and activism. These men were trained with the knowledge that they will likely be beaten, likely be jailed, and the reality of possibly being killed; yet despite being drilled with these realities, they were firm in their resolve. They arrived in Neshoba County Mississippi (unarmed) where they were arrested for speeding. The story goes on to say, despite not being allowed to make a phone call, they were released from jail later that same day after paying a \$20.00 dollar fine. Shortly, after being released they were released, they were on their way home, and they were pulled over again by local police, but this time... a group of Ku Klux Klansman emerged... After pulling the men from their car, they were lined up.

Mickey was asked "Are you that Nigger lover?"... Mickey trying to use his training to deescalate the situation said, "I understand how you feel" ... Before he could say another word... he was shot in the head.

Next, without uttering another sound they executed Andy with a gunshot to the head.

James (oh poor James), tries to run and he is riddled with bullets. After killing him it is said the Klansmen continued to beat his corpus...

... *pause* ...

I am sorry for this explicit accounting. But, I wanted to drive home the level of hate these men and millions others were-up against.

Before discovering their murders, the nation was gripped by the exhaustive search for these men. The federal government not trusting state or local authorities, brought in the FBI and the Navy to search for Mickey, James and Andrew. 44 days later... they found them dumped in a Mississippi swamp. If this isn't tragic enough...

What really strikes me about this story, is the fact that before finding Mickey, James and Andrew, they dredged up 9 black bodies; of which no one had ever heard of.

You see... This is the face of evil... the home of injustice.

Although, much progress has been made, and the days may not be as dark as they were in 1963. Injustice yet exist. I am sure if Martin Luther King Jr. was with us today, he would be continuing to push us to take a stand against injustice.

He would ask us to "Stand Up"

be it an injustice in our Health Care System, or the lack there of... "Stand Up"

be it the pervasiveness of Racism, and the re-insurgence of White Nationalism... "Stand Up"

be it uncontrolled Gun Violence... "Stand Up"

be it fixing our broken immigration system... I am sure Martin Luther King Jr. would tell us to "Stand Up"

"An Injustice anywhere, is a treat to Justice Everywhere"

You may say to yourself, but Mr. Jones... this is Too Big for me. I can't be a hero, the odds are too great against me.

Might I remind you... the timeless values of which our Nation is organized? It was injustice that mobilized a small band of colonist to "Stand Up" against the world's Super Power of that day... the British Empire. Yes, the odds were greatly against them, but standing up is who we are... **we are Americans** it's in our DNA.

(4 min) Closing Remarks - Recollection of a local Hero

Before I close, I want to share a short story about one of my heroes. He's no longer with us, he passed away 6 years ago. His name was Willie Henderson, he was a close and good friend to me, but that's not why he is a hero for me. You see, when I first met Willie he was 71 and running a small business. As Assistant to the City Administrator and the Affirmative Action Officer for the City of Davenport, it wasn't unusual to hear complaints or grievance regarding issues of Discrimination in the Quad City market place. And, Mr. Henderson had no shortage of injustices done to him that he would share with me. But, what struck me about him is even at his late stage in life he poured every ounce of himself in the fight to make sure that no one else would have to suffer the injustices that he suffered. Injustices that at times that I witnessed first-hand, but that didn't stop him? No, in fact, working with him and others, through fits and starts we were able to sponsor and get a state law passed that created opportunities for small businesses. Although, there were still injustices and disparities for minority business when he passed way, it wasn't due to him giving up or giving in.

There were days where I even grew tired, Mr. Henderson always seemed to have energy, even after what I would consider major set-backs. I would ask him from time to time, "What kept you going?"

Sometimes, he would smile and open in song, singing a verse from a old Frank Sinatra song "That's Life" as funny as it seem, some people get kicks stomping on a dream...

Other times...

He would tell me something that I also recall hearing from my mother. Never let a set-back overcome you. Because a Set-back no matter how large, is just a Set-up for a Come-back.

The values of which our Nation is organized is timeless. They call us from our yesterdays, and challenge us to shape better tomorrows. I am challenging you to think big, remember your DNA as Americans and Stand Up.

In closing, I would like to leave you with the closing remarks that Martin Luther King Jr. left us with 55 years ago:

"I believe we are developing a coalition of conscience that will mobilize itself on a continuing basis to the point of bring about a solution."

"I believe somehow and in some way... we shall overcome."

"Before the victory is won, some of us will get scared up a little."

"Before the victory is won, more will be thrown in Jail."

"Before the victory is won, some will be called bad names and misunderstood, some will be called "Reds and Commoners"... Simply because they believe in the brotherhood of men.

"Before the victory is won, someone else may have to face a physical death. A physical death is the price someone must pay to free their children, from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing, can be more redemptive."

"Yes we shall overcome. We are not afraid because, the Lord will see us through."

"We shall overcome because, the Ark of the University is long, but it bends toward Justice."

"We shall overcome because, Carlisle is right... No lie can live forever."

"We shall overcome because, William Cullen Bryant is right... Truth crushed to earth will rise again."

"We shall overcome because, James Russell Lowell is right... "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne." Yet, the scaffold sways the future. Behind the dim unknown. Stand with God within the shadows. Keep watch above his own."

"With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

"With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood."

"With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children all over this nation - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics 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."

... pause ...

God Bless You and Thank You For Having Me.