

Commitments for White America

- *MLK Annual Breakfast*
- *January 15, 2018*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Today is the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, annual prayer breakfast. It is heightened by the fact of our marking in a few months the 50th anniversary of the assassination of this good man, this prophet, this irreplaceable leader for civil rights, this reverend, this pastor. There would not be a Martin Luther King, and there would not be the freedom he envisioned, led, and gave his life for if it were not that he was a “reverend”, that the deepest roots and the ultimate and abiding source of his power was his faith, the faith imbibed from his people, his flowing from and picking up on the Black Social Gospel which had long been growing, and ultimately from the reality that the Holy Spirit of Jesus manifested itself in him and he gave himself to that Spirit, trusted it, and found his courage in the Spirit.

In my remarks, which I am humbled to give this morning, let me give voice at several points to the actual prayers of Martin himself, hoping they will give us all courage in our troubled and fraught times. Because we who are gathered here today are ministers, lay and civic leaders, business and professional people, I begin with the following prayer of Martin himself:

“God grant that ministers, and lay leaders, and civic leaders, and businessmen, and professional people all over the nation will rise up and use the talents and the finances that God has given them, and lead the people on toward the promised land of freedom with rational, calm, nonviolent means.”

That’s a very good place to start; thank you, Martin.

Where these keynote remarks of mine started was from a visit to my president’s office at Seattle University of Rev. Allen Belton and Donny Griffin asking me to help support this year’s breakfast where I had received an award last year. Then there came a return visit from Allen telling me that the committee had unanimously voted that I give the keynote today. Why? Allen explained, “This is the sixth breakfast. At the first four breakfasts we had a black man speak, and at the fifth breakfast we had a black woman speak. We have decided it is time for a white man to speak to white people, since they created the system which has oppressed the blacks, they are the ones who need to undo the system. So that’s why we have chosen you to speak, Father Steve!” As the theme of this breakfast says, “There comes a time.” My time had come!

Thank you very much Reverend Allen! I feel like I am paying for my sins! But in the Catholic Church, when you confess your sins, you are given a penance of saying three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, not giving a keynote of a white man talking to white people about how to overcome the oppression we have created. I must be quite a sinner! But I will do my best as one white man.

I feel in order to do this I need to insert another prayer of Martin's, from his famous "vision in the kitchen", for I feel weak in being able to do what has been asked of me, as Martin felt weak when a white racist threatened him, his home, and his family. Martin prayed:

"Lord, I must confess that I am weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage... Lord, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Now is the hard part in my remarks. I must speak about white privilege—it is both painful to admit about myself and other whites and even more painful because of what it has done to and continues to do to black brothers and sisters. My privilege or white advantage means their oppression, robbing of opportunity, their disadvantage, and denial of their full human status. I can speak for myself about my white privilege but I can't speak for myself alone because no white person is privileged on their own. There is a whole system and a community of white people who have white privilege and perpetuate it and hang onto it, and are very much afraid to lose it.

My students of Seattle University are the ones, above all, both black students—bless them—and their many allies whose eyes have been opened—bless them too—who have made me aware of my own white privilege. I had been unconscious of it. That's why the privilege and its consequences are so pernicious, because many even for all their lives, with all their white family members and friends and colleagues are unaware of their white privilege and what it does to blacks.

It may be unconscious but it is not innocent. It didn't just happen. It came about intentionally by enslaving, by counting blacks for less than a whole person and then segregating and keeping poor, and denying decent education, and legal support, and economic opportunity, and fair housing, and ghettoizing, and keeping apart. Make no mistake, white privilege may be unconscious, but it is not innocent; it is intentional in its long history. Today it is no longer innocent for any American not to become aware of their white privilege. The very extreme conditions of our country demand our awareness; blacks and our young people demand our awareness. Indeed, as our theme says, "There Comes a Time" to come awake. To remain unconscious of one's white privilege today is no longer innocent; it is an intentional refusal to face the truth; it is an intentional putting on blinders in order to enjoy the benefits of the privilege and sanction the denigration of black people. We are responsible for what we are aware of. You can't live awake in America today and not be aware of white privilege. We are now responsible for it. We must stop claiming innocence; stop denying.

Who was Martin most concerned about, felt most betrayed by, in his famous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" written on toilet paper, after going to jail on Good Friday? He wrote in that letter:

"I must confess that over the last few years I have been greatly disappointed with the white moderate... who is more devoted to "order" than justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of

justice... We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people...

“I had hoped that the white moderate would see this... I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those who have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.”

Unfortunately, wouldn't Martin say this even more forcefully and truthfully today in our times when the lack of concern and even open hostility of white America has become more evident, unmistakable, inexcusable? Not just Martin Luther King, but all black Americans have reason—even proof—to be, in Martin's words, “greatly disappointed” in whites, our “appalling silence” and our lack of “strong, persistent and determined action” for justice for blacks.

How do I experience white privilege? It is like I am always at home, never have to explain myself, don't think of myself as having a culture, but rather just having what is normal, common, the way things must be for all people, being always reinforced by the laws of society, by the economy, by education, by literature, by the media, by American history, by all my relationships and friends, even by my religion and church and faith community. This is pure and simple white privilege, the privilege of the dominant, the privilege of the winners, the privilege of those who say what is what and what is right. I like the image for this—and I borrow it from Michael Eric Dyson, to whom I owe so much for this talk, in his book, the best book on this subject, Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America—the image for white privilege of always enjoying home-court advantage, the court and arena are ours, all the fans are ours, the cheerleaders and band and Jumbotron videos are all ours; even the referees are paid by us. We never have to travel to another court. We win because we play the whole season with a home-court advantage. White privilege is totally self-contained and completely self-reinforcing.

My experience of white privilege is that it is neither innocent nor innocuous. Someone gets hurt. First the other gets hurt, the black person seen as other, as threatening, as dangerous, not as an individual but as black. White privilege distances the other, is afraid of friendship except most rarely and it is unlikely a very full or easy friendship. It keeps the other distant and down and dangerous and diminished and deficient. Someone gets hurt... and it is, above all, the black who gets hurt.

He or she is not the only one who gets hurt. So too do I, so too do whites. We live in cellophane wrapping, without direct contact with truth or reality. We miss out on and are impoverished in our own humanity, losing out on the richness, the depth, the beauty, the fullness of humanity, so much of which is held by and can only be known in the black person whom we do not know, from whom we are invisibly, but effectively, hermetically sealed. We also get hurt because we make our democracy a lie, not a governance “of, by, and for the people”—not all of them, only some of them—and we miss out on the creativity and brains and the vision of blacks who could make America great—not great again—because of exclusion and oppression it has never truly been as great as it could have been, never what it was envisioned to be. I get hurt, we get hurt, America gets hurt. Martin prayed explicitly for whites. Let us listen to him:

“We pray especially for every white citizen of this great city. Instill in them an awareness of the deep scars, the terrible hurt, and the tragic disappointment that segregation has inflicted upon the Negro. May they, through some powerful act of justice, truly atone for the sins they have perpetrated upon their colored brothers. For those who are still caught in the dark valley of prejudice, we pray that Thou will guide them to sunlit paths of open-hearted good will.”

It is not enough for white America with its privilege to apologize; it must first come awake to its privilege, stop pretending innocence, know who is getting hurt, and in the words of Martin Luther King “have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action”. Before I get to what that action should be I need Martin to pray again for us. I need a prayer of his forgiveness. If he could pray for forgiveness for those he mentions in the following prayer, he can certainly pray for forgiveness for us who perpetuate and thrive on white privilege. Let’s hear Martin pray:

“We are still inflicted with economic injustice—Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches—but Father forgive them. There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence who will stop us out on some wayside road and beat us, leaving us half dead—but Father forgive them. Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters—but Father forgive them. Our children, merely desiring education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder—but Father forgive them.”

Yes, we apologize; but more importantly, we ask for your forgiveness and we ask that you pray that God forgive us.

Now what should we do? What should we who created and profit from the system of white privilege which continues to oppress, limit and denigrate blacks, do? Here are ten things I personally think are most important for us to do, not the Ten Commandments, but “Ten Commitments for White America”:

1. Reread the true American history, with all the black heroes who built our country and suffered terribly; read that history—it is fully available to us—not the history that we have read which shores up our privilege.
2. Make compensation or reparation in practical ways by providing young black people better mentors in school and extra financial help to go to college and closer advice to know how to succeed within education.
3. Every white person needs to visit a prison or a jail to know first-hand the black persons who undeservedly and disproportionately are there, the conditions they live in, and must lobby to change lengthy sentences and inadequate legal defense for blacks.
4. There is a new segregation of blacks in the redistricting going on which pens blacks within one voting district so that their votes—if not challenged in the first place—do not expand beyond the pen to elect many more representative officials. Whites must join the

efforts, led by former Attorney General Eric Holder, to counteract this unjust segregational redistricting.

5. More than half of all Americans who apply for jobs, get them not only because of their qualifications, but because of who they know and what networks they have. Whites must go out of their way not just for non-discriminating hiring practices, but to be those persons in companies and part of that network that give blacks in practice equal access to jobs.
6. The most segregated morning in America is Sunday morning, when whites and blacks are more apart in their church communities than at any other time of the week. This morning, today, is a welcome example of blacks reaching out from their churches to whites. Whites must welcome to their pulpits and go to the churches of worship of blacks. This is more than ecumenism. It is having the courage to be really the people of God and to meet the God of all people, a God from whom we may not realize we are distant because of our segregation rather than congregation
7. Whites must show up and be present and protest with blacks in demonstrations of “Black Lives Matter”—because black lives have not mattered to whites as much as white lives have. Whites must endorse black athletes taking the occasion of the national anthem to make it visible that the nation has failed them. Where are whites demanding that Colin Kaepernick deserves a job. How ironic that kneeling in America is offensive to white America!
8. Perhaps most of white privilege and keeping down of blacks is for the sake of economic benefit. Money is in the bloodstream of white America privilege and thriving. Whites must look far more clearly and justly at black poverty, its causes and consequences and must put every housing, tax, and spending measure to the test of whether or not it helps blacks to raise themselves from poverty. Our white priorities can no longer be for the sake of our white privileges.
9. Ultimately the ending of white privilege is a matter of personal and collective conversion. No measure will really dent white privilege until whites are converted by real and abundant and ongoing and open and enjoyed friendships with blacks. All whites must ask themselves how many black friends do I really have? How many times have I been in their homes, enjoyed and relaxed in their families and lives, included them in my life? Friendship is the most essential fulcrum for prying loose white privilege.
10. Finally, in this my personal list of the “Ten Commitments for White America” I must say with you that I believe that white privilege and discriminating against blacks is so deep, so long lasting, so much of our inherited fabric that God alone in Jesus Christ can change our hearts and our communities from this curse and this sin. We can’t do it on our own. Whites must place blacks in their hearts in prayer, ask for forgiveness from God, and pray to love blacks as Christ loves them and us. Only God’s grace can get to the roots of our discrimination and fears.

These “Ten Commitments for White America” are such a challenge and so dependent on all of us being lifted up by God that we need another prayer by Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior. Here is the prayer of his which we need:

“And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling. And now unto Him who is able to lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. And now unto Him who is able to solve the race problem if we will cooperate with Him. And now unto Him who is able to transform this cosmic energy into constructive force. Now unto Him who is able to transform this midnight of injustice into a glowing daybreak of freedom and justice. To Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now henceforth, and forever more.”

Indeed, lift us all, but especially white America to a “buoyancy of hope”, to, as Martin says, “solve the race problem if we will cooperate with” God, giving us as Martin dreamed a “constructive force... to transform this midnight of justice into a glowing daybreak of freedom and justice.”

Let me bring my remarks to a close with two personal comments. First, I wrote this keynote after Christmas at a Carmelite Monastery in the countryside of England, in a place of quiet, apart from all else, where two dozen nuns give their lives in surrender to God, believing that in this way we and all the world are more surrendered to God, more in God’s hands, and praying for the kingdom to which Martin Luther, the king, dedicated his life, his toil, his suffering, and his death as they, the nuns, do. I mention this because we who are gathered here this morning in this annual breakfast, are not alone, neither this day, nor any other day of our lives, but are accompanied by a praying heart of our Christian faith whether in a Catholic convent or in the homes and houses of worship of faith-filled people who are given over to God’s will. We all—especially white America with such a challenge before it of conversion through and through—are in the hands of God, the one God who privileges all of us with his grace, forgiveness, and love. This is a very good place to be today and each day.

My second personal comment is the frank confession that the invitation by you has been, I experience, a conversion for me. You—like the nuns, but in a different way—have placed me in a good place, a place where God can get at me. I thank you profoundly and I promise to do my best to follow the Ten Commitments I have laid out and to pray for all of you, all of us, together with Martin who, in heaven, I know prays for us this day and every day. Let me give him the last word. I pray with his words. May we all know he prays with and for us:

“...finally, help us to realize that man was created to shine like the stars and live on through all eternity. Keep us, we pray, in perfect peace, help us to walk together, pray together, sing together, and live together until that day when all God’s children, Black, White, Red, and Yellow will rejoice in one common band of humanity in the kingdom of our Lord and of our God, we pray. Amen.”