

A Message to the Concerned White American

SEGUN IDOWU-SATURDAY, JANUARY 16, 2016

This message was delivered to over 900 congregants at Temple Israel Boston for their Shabbat Tzedek (Social Justice) honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nearly forty-eight years ago on a warm Thursday evening, America's greatest prophet emerged from the sickness he had, for days, been battling and stepped onto the balcony just outside of his motel room.

He could not have known then, but he would be making a request for his last meal before the grip of death would finally bring his life to what he would have himself described as, "more lofty significance."

Nearly forty-eight April's have come and gone since that day.

Forty-eight long, triumphant, dynamic, turbulent years.

Years filled with significant progress and with stagnant movement.

Forty-eight years ago, black and brown peoples in America found themselves at the lowest rung of the human condition.

And today we can, without a shadow of a doubt, proclaim that there is almost no institution left between the sandy shorelines of these United States that has not felt the touch of a colored hand.

Forty-eight years ago, black and brown peoples in America found themselves on "a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."

Today, more people of color have safely secured themselves on the mainland of the so-called “middle class” and contribute a buying power of more than \$1.3 trillion to the broader global economy.

Forty-eight years ago, black and brown peoples in America found themselves dejected and unappreciated; their skin, hair, and bodies called ugly and ghetto.

Today, mainstream American culture not only embraces, but also envelops, large portions of black and brown culture, quickly adopting new trends and iconic movements as quickly as these marginalized groups can develop them.

And now we are forced to, on the 87th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., take inventory of where we are today and determine how best to repair this tired, beaten up world, and bring even a flicker of light to corners of profound darkness.

We have, as a nation, accomplished many things in the name of racial justice since the execution of Dr. King.

We have drowned out the music industry, belting out the likes of Stevie Wonder and Miles Davis; Aretha Franklin and Luther Vandross; Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur; Bruno Mars and Beyoncé Knowles.

We have conquered the world of sports, producing Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez; Michael Jordan and Serena Williams; Jackie Joyner, Cam Newton, and Lebron.

We have improved the field of science, offering such geniuses as Mae Jemison and Walter Massey; Ellen Ochoa and Patricia Bath; Franklin Chang-Diaz and Neil deGrasse Tyson.

We have sent over 100 individual black and brown women and men to the halls of Congress.

And there was that one time we had two black United States Senators serving at the same time.

We have twice elected a black president.

These were the triumphant times.

But there is a tendency to let our alleged successes lift us so high as to overlook the miles of sharp and difficult road that lay ahead.

There is a nagging repetition in our ability to goof our best chances, blunder our greatest possibilities, and fumble pregnant opportunities to move our society closer to that “beloved community.”

I pause here briefly to reflect on the words my grandfather shared with me before he went away.

As he catalogued his life experiences, he told me that we must all be careful not to confuse motion with progress. For, if I were to push his rocking chair, it would move, but it would make no progress.

For in these institutions that we have touched, one or two from our clan may have risen to great heights, but far too many of us have yet to make it past the front door.

Though many black and brown people have found their way to that mainland, that isle of poverty still remains overcrowded and under-resourced (and with King we must question first why that manmade island exists at all).

And those who found themselves the last to enjoy the fruits of the middle class now find themselves the first to be pushed out of it.

With mortgages of planned obsolescence; redistricting and redlining; a classroom that is *more* segregated now than ever before and funds drained from its coffers; rising taxes and flattened wages, the bottom has begun to fall out, and those who dangled slightly above the dividing line between comfortable and poor now find themselves on top of it.

That culture of which I spoke that has arrested the American experience may be sought after now, but is equally exploited; it may be copied, but at the same time

vilified; it may be considered American, but that delineation is not extended toward its producers.

This is exactly where we are today.

We have made moves and strides, but we have made little progress.

And we are gathered here in this sacred space on the night of Dr. King's birthday left to wonder what more we must do in this new age of dramatic revolution and passionate resistance to correct the oppressions of old and injustices of the present.

I should say - more honestly really - what more *you* should do.

It has become apart of our annual January tradition to deliver or hear speeches about how far *we* have come as a nation; about what *we* must do to keep progress from falling too far behind; about the fact that *we* must have an honest dialogue about race.

But it is this very notion, in my opinion, that is at the very root of the racial problem. Not merely the idea that all we do is pay lip service to this issue, but the fact that we falsely frame the problem from the very start.

For, this is not an issue that *we* must tackle together – people of color have been fighting racism since its inception.

This is not a problem that *we* must discuss with one another – people of color have been talking about freedom since our shackled feet touched this soil.

This is not a dilemma that *we* must overcome; but rather one that calls on the masses of our white sisters and brothers to finally undertake.

Racial injustice was not created with, institutionalized for, or perpetuated by the minority groups of this nation.

And so, therefore, it is a problem that must be defeated by the offspring of its authors.

Now, you may say to me at this point that you *are* involved in this movement; that you *are* an active participant in the struggle for freedom; that you *are* conscious to the crippling chronicle of crises carried out by this country; that you are “woke.”

And I do not disregard that fact.

I dare not gloss over the very real and important work that groups like SURJ, the Knapsack Group, the Boston Door Knockers, this congregation, and many others are doing in our neighborhoods as white people educating themselves and others to the omnipresent obstacles facing people of color.

But the morbid truth is that there are far too many white people, across this nation and all over this city, who lend their complicity to the preservation of racism with their silence and dormancy.

I imagine, however, that like many here, the many masses wonder what more can be done to help this movement.

People of color are buried by the mountain of entrenched racism and find ourselves making the dig to the other side virtually alone.

What we need today are more laborers, and laborers who are willing to do the same backbreaking, dirty work *we* are doing to get us to that Promised Land.

We need laborers who are willing to recruit more people; laborers who are willing to go outside of the comfortable boxes they have created for themselves to spread the message of those whom they support.

I don't mean just in this space.

I don't mean that you post a progressive tweet or share on Facebook an article about social justice.

I don't mean that you nod your head or speak in hushed tones about these issues with close friends or loved ones who already agree with you.

I mean in your social settings and in your work environment.

I mean in your family gatherings and community meetings.

I mean that you actively push the agenda of the disenfranchised in your boardrooms and your classrooms and your cloakrooms and your courtrooms.

The importance of understanding that many white people only listen to other white people was made clear to me by the work of the Boston Door Knockers.

As many of you know, for the last year and a half, a small band of Bostonians known as the Boston Police Camera Action Team have been working to put body cameras on Boston's Finest as well as ensure that its community-inspired, written, and approved policy guides its use.

BPCAT is proud that its efforts made an otherwise ambivalent administration say "yes" when, for so long, it said "no."

This year it's looking forward to the beginning of what is hopefully a substantive pilot program covering *every* neighborhood of Boston - not just the Black ones - and outfitted on close to 100 officers so that Boston can produce the best case study in the nation.

We were not so successful on the latter portion of our goal.

A majority of the members of the City Council shamefully allowed the policy to die in committee.

It would be a further shame if the legislative voice of this great city were to allow this policy to die once more after we re-introduce it in the City Council again. And so the work continues.

Our efforts would not have been nearly as successful, not only with the help of all of the members of BPCAT, but also the work of the Boston Door Knockers.

I will not go into great detail of how they sacrificed time and risked their own well being helping us in October of last year.

I will not explain how the Door Knockers went to the top 4 districts in the city and knocked on every door spreading the message of BPCAT, or how they managed to obtain over 800 petition signatures and signed letters to those Councilors that stood in our way.

That isn't the important part about this group's story.

The Door Knockers are a group of concerned white Americans who understand deep within themselves that many white people will only listen to other white people.

Because of this understanding, they feel it is incumbent on them, as white people, to make their fellow brethren attune to the cries of the disinherited.

What we need are laborers who will follow the example of the Door Knockers; who are willing to suffer the slings and arrows of a bruised reputation; who are willing to conquer their fear of confrontation, and talk to their sisters and brothers and advance the message that black and brown people aren't just making this stuff up.

But – and here is my second point – we need laborers who understand that they can be just as dirty as those forces that created the mountain.

Many supporters must disabuse themselves of the notion that the beliefs they hold lift them to a higher moral plane than to others.

There is a hypocritical notion that to hold what is considered a “progressive opinion” means that there is some greater level of humanity one can claim and some level of humanity one must forfeit if you do not.

Especially popular is the idea that one is better because they live in the part of the country that fought to end slavery or that did not experience de jure segregation.

And maybe this is true.

The South certainly has a lot to do to rectify their historic injustices against people of color.

I am reminded of a town named Bolton, Mississippi that has a population of over 50% people of color.

It is a quaint paradise. The people get along and smile at one another.

But there are certain cracks in the veneer of post-civil rights and post-racial Bolton.

While signs no longer indicate who can and cannot use public facilities, students of color make up almost 85% of the public schools; 78% of these students are low income.

On the other side of this equation, only 35% of the teachers reflect the makeup of the city and the school population.

Despite making up over 50% of the population, people of color own fewer than 25% of the businesses.

21% of the residents live in poverty, nearly double that of the state average, and higher than the national average. 83% of those in poverty in Bolton are minority families and persons.

Very many of you would agree with me that this is a travesty that must be mended.

Many here would also express a lack of surprise given that, this is Mississippi after all, and that such a racist structure should be expected from the heart of Dixie.

And though a great many of you would agree with me that this is a terrible condition, I must confess that this is not Bolton, Mississippi, but rather Boston, Massachusetts.

Not a town in the center of a state where racist attitudes and systems are almost marrow-deep, but the capital of the liberal bastion of North America.

A Chinese proverb instructs us to “Deal with the faults of others as gently as with your own.”

Dr. King explained this phenomenon in his final publication, “Where Do We Go From Here?” saying:

“For the vast majority of white Americans, the past decade – the first phase [of the Civil Rights Movement] – had been a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not of equality. White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination.”

“It is eas[ier] to integrate a lunch counter,” King said, “than to guarantee a livable income and a good solid job. It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee the right to live in sanitary, decent housing conditions. It is much easier to integrate a public park than it is to make genuine, quality, integrated education a reality.”

And so one must do their best in this movement to quell their ego and entitlement, realizing that no snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.

So we need laborers who will encourage others to join the dig.

We need laborers who recognize they can be just as dirty too.

And finally, we need laborers who are willing to dig, and not direct.

Very often, those who are willing to help and to give feel that doing so purchases a pass for input.

But I am here to offer a new idea:

People of color know the way out.

People of color understand the challenges facing us and so know, too, the solutions for defeating them.

All we need - and ever needed - are, not only people who are willing to listen, but desperate to follow.

We need skilled and devoted hands who will help with the dig.

In preparation for this address, I was repeatedly alerted to the concept of “Tikkun Olam.”

As I educated myself on this powerful paradigm, I began to wonder what I must do to introduce the rest of my fellow citizens to this higher ideal.

Notable to me, especially, were two concepts:

Chesed, or loving kindness – the practice of individual acts to relieve immediate needs; and Tzedek, the pursuit of justice through systemic, structural change.

I must admit that there is a simmering debate in my own community and across this nation between people who believe one way or the other is the most effective way forward.

But I happen to believe that proponents of only practicing Chesed ignore the bigger picture.

Proponents of only practicing Tzedek ignore the individual.

And I would submit to you this evening that the “Beloved Community” is not found in the thesis of Chesed or the antithesis of Tzedek, but in a higher synthesis that combines the truths of both.

Realizing that you must not *only* be concerned about the officer or white supremacist who murder, but in the system that produced the murderers;

That one must not *only* be focused on the homeless individual on the corner, but also on the edifice that produced the beggar.

And this congregation can continue to lead by example.

This congregation can recognize the crime of an ever-increasing wealth gap in this city and push our officials to contract city services with more minority and women-owned businesses.

But, this congregation can *also* adopt Four Corners or Grove Hall or Mattapan Square and determine that you will intentionally eat at those restaurants and shop in those stores to generate wealth in that district.

This congregation can discuss the evils of mass incarceration and lobby state legislators to eliminate mandatory minimums and ban the box.

But, this congregation can also identify several local, small non-profits to invest in that are committed to making re-entry as successful as possible for all of the formerly incarcerated.

Understanding with the Pirkei Avot that, “It is not upon you to finish the task, nor are you free to desist from it.” (Pirkei Avot 2:21)

In other words, we may not get to that Promised Land, but we still need to dig.

And I tell ya that I continue to remain steadfast in the belief that things will get better.

I continue to believe because Sojourner was right in saying, “Truth is powerful and it [does] prevail.”

I continue to believe because Douglass was right in saying, “Without struggle, there is no progress.”

I continue to believe because Heschel was right in saying, “Few are guilty but all are responsible.”

I continue to believe because Martin was right in saying, “If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail.”

I continue to believe because that prophet Kendrick Lamar was right in saying, “We been hurt before. We been down before. But we gon' be alright.”

This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will return to this sanctuary and sing in some not too distant tomorrow in a jubilant past tense, "We *have* overcome! We have overcome! Deep in my heart, we *did* believe we *would* overcome.