A Call to Unity: Reflections on Martin Luther King Jr. Day

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We gather here today to commemorate the life and enduring legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: the voice of the American civil rights movement; a nonviolent activist for racial, social, political and economic equality; a powerful prophet of peace, justice, unity and love; a Nobel Peace Prize winner; and, above all else, a minister of reconciliation in service to the God who is reconciling all things to himself through Jesus Christ our Lord. We can recall and celebrate all of the great and seemingly impossible things that King and folk like Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, Fred Gray, Joseph Lowery, John Lewis and countless others accomplished during the tumultuous times of the 1950s and 1960s, and we certainly should. We can recall and celebrate the tremendous progress we have made in the ensuing decades, including the historic inauguration of President Barack Obama one year ago tomorrow, and we certainly should. We should acknowledge that God has brought us a mighty long way; and while we may not be where we want to be or where we ought to be, we should thank the Lord that we are not where we used to be.

Yet even in the midst of all this appropriate celebration, we must not deceive ourselves and become complacent. We must realize that in far too many circumstances and lives, the promises of Dr. King’s dream and the spirit to which it calls us remain unfulfilled and unrealized. We must realize that an essential deficit still exists among us. When we have a political discourse and a news media stained with a sickening spirit of discord, fear and hostility—an essential deficit exists among us. When prominent religious leaders and media pundits use faith as a wedge to divide us rather than a means to unite us together in common purpose—an essential deficit exists among us. When we continue wasting billions of dollars and precious lives on unjust wars and when the bankers on Wall Street continue raking in record profits and bonuses at the expense of the folks on Main Street during an economic recession—an essential deficit exists among us. When far too many young people in this country are caught up in gangs, crime and drugs, and are sitting in jail cells rather than living out meaningful lives of learning and service to others—an essential deficit exists among us.

When it takes natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the recent earthquake in Haiti to reveal the oppressed and the marginalized whom we might otherwise ignore and whom God calls upon us to actively care for and receive as our very own—an essential deficit exists among us. When vast inequities still exist along sexual orientation, gender, racial and socioeconomic lines in our health care, employment, educational, immigration, airport security and criminal justice systems—an essential deficit exists among us. When a young man told me recently that his girlfriend’s parents don’t want him to date their daughter simply because of his skin color and when a young woman told me recently that she does not have the same
church-based ministry opportunities that I do simply because of her gender—an essential deficit exits among us. When eleven o’clock on Sunday mornings continues to be the most segregated and exclusive hour in American life—an essential deficit exits among us. In these and in countless other ways, an essential deficit continues to exist amongst us—one that must be openly addressed and forever closed.

So if we are to truly do justice to Dr. King’s life and enduring legacy—and ultimately to the spirit of our Lord himself—let us awake from our slumber and complacency, for much work remains to be done. Let us realize the fierce urgency of acting right now because justice too long delayed is justice denied. Let us begin—each and every single one of us—by searching our hearts and confessing our complicity, both active and passive, in all of this. Let us resolve to forgive and to reconcile with those whom we have hurt and who have hurt us, that we might forget what is behind us and strain ahead toward that great camp meeting in the promised land. Let us move beyond the scapegoating, fearmongering and negativity and embody the more excellent way of love and nonviolence for our suffering world’s sake. Let us come together in a spirit of unity, brotherhood and sisterhood as we seek to solve the problems that affect all of us—rich and poor, young and old, male and female, Democrat and Republican, conservative and liberal, Latino and Asian, African and Caucasian alike. Let us seek to be that beloved community wherein black will not be held back, brown can stick around, yellow will be mellow, the red man can get ahead, man, and white will embrace what is right. Let us resolve that we will never tire, falter, or fail until that day when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream and all of God’s precious children are truly free at last. This is the spirit of Dr. King’s life and legacy. This is the call of our Lord. May God grant us the grace and the courage to answer it in every way that we can.

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