

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Justice *By The Rev. Dr. Arthur L. Cribbs Jr.*

Coretta Scott King, the late widow of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used to begin many of her statements with the refrain, "If Martin were alive today..." She would then go on to identify issues, causes and concerns her slain husband would have addressed and even placed his life in harm's way because of his convictions.

So, I am borrowing from Mrs. King's familiar signatory remarks by saying if Dr. King were alive today he would be standing and speaking out about the critical, disruptive events that grip our souls and stymie so much life. There is no doubt in my mind that he would be labeled a 'trouble-maker' and perhaps a great threat to 'National Security' in the same manner he was so identified by the likes of former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Dr. King's message to us today would include his declaration of care for the maligned and unjustly incarcerated men and women who have been separated from their families because of their immigrant status within our borders.

On this day when the impoverished people of Haiti cry out for help, Dr. King would find himself on the streets of Port Au Prince and in the hillside shanty towns where food, shelter and water are scarce. Long before the devastation of the 7.0 earthquake crumbled the fragile shells of structures that tumbled in the shaking, Dr. King would have given voice to the conditions that made such horrible circumstances ripe for disaster.

The graphic images that have saturated television screens and newspapers this past week did not come into focus with the horrific and terrifying quaking that left tens of thousands of people dead and scores more homeless and helpless. Instead, the flotillas of hungry and weakened human beings with the desperate efforts to escape that island nation over the many years by Haitians who arrived in the United States and the many more who have constantly been turned away or imprisoned if they successfully reached American shores have been signals that reminded us of the jagged realities haunting survivors for decades because of neglect. Dr. King would say today our sisters and brothers cannot be ignored without us also realizing the snare of compromise. Our quality of life is directly determined by the welfare of others. There is no denying how closely tied together we are regardless of where we are or how we live. Haiti this week reminds us again of the intertwining web of humanity's connectedness.

If Dr. King were alive today he would be standing on the arbitrary border between the United States and Mexico. He would not be there with the militia and the Minute Men and the vigilantes who dare to threaten the poor and suffering and struggling sojourners who seek opportunities to support their families. No, Dr. King would not use his magnificent voice to shout epithets and vile, vicious insults toward those who risk their lives to eke out a living on the margins. Instead, Dr. King would pray in earnest for divine intervention and human compassion to strengthen the resolve of those men, women and children who simply want to live fully.

If Dr. King were alive today he would advise this nation's leaders not to squander our vast resources on the escalation and prosecution of wars. He would wisely warn us of the senseless abuse of our blessings by destroying other cultures and needlessly endangering the lives of civilians who desire tranquility and the social transactions of civility.

If Dr. King were alive today he would point to the education system of America and raise difficult questions about the transfer of priorities away from the immediate and

successful preparation of our children and youth to the motives of profits and social engineering that reduce the possibilities of their proper growth and development of dreams.

If Dr. King were alive today he would pronounce clearly a clarion call for us to return to God and order our lives to make God first. He would urge us to humble ourselves in prayer and submit to God. More than anything else, he would remind us of the people of faith who stood in the middle of the city as they listened to Nehemiah, and after listening surrendered themselves to God. Dr. King would call us out of our sense of comfort with violence and urge us to retain our natural state of peaceful living.

Dr. King would remind us of our many blessings and encourage us to become a greater source of blessing to others. More than that, as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Dr. King would empathetically and prophetically prod us to take the teaching of Jesus seriously as we navigate our way through the troubled waters of social challenges. Yes, he would tell us to love one another and forgive those who hurt us. He would push us to be a people of mercy and forgiveness. Dr. King would preach a message of justice that is inclusive of all people regardless of race, creed, gender, nationality, social status, or political affiliation.

He would not separate justice from faith...church from civic responsibility. Dr. King would urge us to turn toward each other and not against one another. His message to us this day would be to overcome evil with good...overcome hatred with love...overcome poverty with opportunity...and overcome violence with tolerance. His is a pertinent message that applies to the conditions and situations that surround us. His message would comfort the afflicted and, no doubt, afflict the comfortable. It is a timely and necessary message.

In a precise and important way, Dr. King is alive. His voice is not muted. It is up to us to make his message heard even now.

The prophet Amos understood the importance of justice and working on behalf of those who are ignored and forgotten. Amos...although considered minor in the school of prophets...had a major message that gives hope to those who are cheated and abused...those who suffer. God sees what is happening. God cares. Amos understood how God places a high priority on justice. As people of faith, we, too, must take justice seriously. Jesus understood the importance of justice. We must take justice seriously. Dr. King knew the importance of justice...we must take justice seriously.

On this Martin Luther King Sunday, we are called to see and understand what it means to be faithful and committed to that which is just...fair...and equitable. The prophet Micah asked, "What does God require of us?" The answer, "To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God." Dr. King believed in and worked for justice. We must do no less.