

Let us march on till victory is won

Meditations Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington

Fifty years ago, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led 250,000 people in the March on Washington. The historic event laid the foundation for the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts and was a monumental turning point in the movement toward equality. The themes of King's famous speech, "I have a dream," resonate today, as the march against discrimination and economic inequality continues. Forward Movement offers twelve days of prayers, written by the Rev. Robert Thompson, as a way to honor and remember the March on Washington and answer the call to stand up against inequalities in our time. Thompson is a minister in the African-Methodist Church and school minister for Phillips Exeter Academy, a national boarding school located in New Hampshire.



Day One

For he is our peace; in the flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

Ephesians 2: 14, 15

Those who marched, fifty years ago, were united on at least one thing: They were doing the work of God. The process, as we have learned from many who are still here to tell the tale, was messy, with the typical wrangling and in-fighting common to great change movements. They were clamoring for position and influence, and they were sexist. In fact, all of the normal human foibles and faults were in full array, including deep fear and skepticism. Still, they were prepared spiritually. They dressed seriously. They were about their (and our) Father's business. They were convinced that the promised new humanity was within their reach. They came together with a clear vision, black and white, male and female, rich and poor, from the north and from the south, across many faiths, across both parties, with a political purpose they believed to be God's purpose: to secure economic and social justice and voting rights and to continue to do all they could to remove every remaining vestige of racial discrimination from our society. Their conviction that their work was God's work was central to all of the successes and changes that brought them, individually and collectively to that march on Washington.



These meditations are provided by Forward Movement as part of our effort to encourage discipleship—prayer and meditation leading to transformation of our selves and our world.

As we commemorate their work fifty years later, let us also recommit ourselves to the spiritual heart of their work. Still it is true that God has removed the dividing wall of hostility. Let us not rebuild another. In spite of the rhetoric of our day, we know that God, alone, is our peace. Let us seek that sure and lasting peace. The work seems more complex in many ways, and those human foibles and faults are exhaustingly too well known to us. Nevertheless, our God is still a God of justice. Our God is still creating a new humanity through us.

Day Two

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

Perhaps the boldest claim of America is that we could create one nation from many parts. Usually, as any student of history will attest, people who are different from each other, fight. Our nation claims something bold, something still new. America claims that out of many voices, many places of origin, many points of view, many ways of doing things, many ways of seeing God, we can create one nation that would be indivisible and durable. With our history, we have claimed that we could show the world a new way to be and to live. This was our prophetic gift to the world. This is our challenge to our selves in these most fractious times. Are we one? Can we become one? Is that portion of the American dream still a possibility? Can we find within our hearts some foundation for truly being one with our brothers and sisters across America? Is this still the work to which Christ is calling us?

All things are relative in these days of post-Christian America. The temptation is to hunker down in the face of the confusion of unfamiliar voices and points of view and to define and defend our particular point of view with swords drawn and in full battle array. Because we lay claim to the One God who has created all that we can ever know or desire, a more embracing approach is appropriate. We are all children of God, created by God, given life by that same God, benefitting from the same blessings and suffering from the same injustices. All of this was true, before any of us endorsed any creed. ". . . before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58) Let us therefore reach out to our brothers and sisters with humility and clear commitment.

Day Three

He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of steadfast love of the LORD.

Psalms 33:5

Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Render true judgments; show kindness and mercy to one another."

Zechariah 7:9

Our eyes are so focused on the here and now that we lose sight of this notion: justice is found with God. Human systems do a lot, and our courts may be the best hope we have for justice here on earth. Again and again, however, we are disappointed by the decisions and actions of our system of justice because we know they fail to be true justice. African American males, in particular, have developed sophisticated ways of functioning in our

society, minimizing encounters with those who uphold the law in order to avoid the negative repercussions that so often result from those encounters. It is miraculous that this cleverness does not make it impossible for us to love our country. Perhaps we err when we trust our human systems to supply our justice. In a sense, those sophisticated adjustments are capitulations to the notion that there is no justice in America, an admission that justice is not to be known by us in this world.

God seems to expect something different from us. In the scriptures, as shown in these passages from Psalms and Zechariah, we are reminded that God expects just behavior from God's people. God is a God of justice, and those who know God must seek justice. Pragmatism encourages sophisticated means of avoiding negative encounters. History cautions us to have low expectations when we enter the justice system. But God is calling us to be vigilant and tireless in working to manifest true justice in all aspects of our corporate life.

May Almighty God empower our efforts to manifest justice in our world.

Day Four

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Isaiah 58:10-11

Everywhere in our land, we see the needy. We know of families who have been devastated because of bankruptcies as a result of medical costs, and we know people who are suffering for want of health care. We know people who depend upon the generosity of care agencies for clothing or housing. We know people who would be hungry except for the supplemental meal programs administered by our government. We know many, many people who must work multiple jobs because of low wages. We also know that the gap between the richest and the most in our land continues to widen. We witness how our government places great hope and emphasis on those who have much, believing them to be the source of hope for the many who have little. The poor and the middle class in our nation are embattled. More and more, the policies of our government seem hostile to the needs of the poor and needy in our midst, or they are made slide ever lower on the scale of national priorities.

We need to always remember the needs of the poor. Let us not shy away from naming policies that are hostile to the poor, policies that are sinful and shameful. They are contrary to the desires of God as recorded again and again in scriptures. One preacher reminds us, "Attention to the small benefits all." This is the assurance God gives us when through the prophet Isaiah. When we care for the neediest, God will supply the needs of all.

Day Five

Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.

1 John 2:9

It is very easy to demonize those who disagree with us. How easily do we wrap ourselves in righteous indignation, as if we served a God who served only us, one whose concerns did not extend to the needs of all of creation. We are among those who have been demonized. Easily within our collective memory is the time when we were the cast off ones, deemed to be “less than” by those in power.

Still living are some whose very bodies bear the brunt of this demonization: tattoos on the arms of holocaust survivors, scars on the bodies of those who were beaten or who suffered the savagery of dogs set upon them. Fifty years ago, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the immensity of the task before them, those who marched showed each other and the world that we could love each as brothers and sisters, in spite of history, creed, and political party. Love triumphed over all.

This remains the task. We must walk in the light, and we must allow the light to root out every darkness. We must allow ourselves to be open to God's prophetic presence in our lives, enabling us to expose where we hate our brother or sister. We must not be satisfied that things are as good as they might be, but instead with opened eyes and strengthened hearts, we must strive for a world that is as good as God wants it to be. Let us see and support those people who are demonized. There are still those who are despised, for no good reason. Sometimes, the despisers are our selves. God, deliver us from our hatreds.

Day Six

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

James 2:8-9

Of course, it is very hard to love. We throw the word around, as if it were the confection we so often use to symbolize love: chocolate, created to be savored; sweet, succulent, and indulgent. No, love is hard, demanding, compelling, humbling, relentless. Jesus died because of love. Women give birth in love. Strong marriages survive because of love. Love is self-sacrificing, self-denying, self-giving. Love corrects us and (re)directs us. Love empowers us and supplies our hope and faith. When one has been wronged, or when one's humanity is challenged or denied in some way, hatred or violence is often seen as a solution, as a means of redress. Giving in to those human emotions can satisfy, for a while. But those emotions always end in negative and destructive ways. Love, on the other hand, is positive and creative. Love always leaves more life in its wake. Love is what God expects of us.

As we honor those who walked fifty years ago, let us not fail to understand the strength of

their love. They loved their country and the possibility of a united nation. With open eyes, and suffering all around them, they managed to love their enemies and believe in the people of God they and their enemies could become. They loved God and believed in God's power to change. And so, they walked. They walked in strength.

Day Seven

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:14-17

One of the negative critiques of the church that was frequently heard in the late fifties and early sixties was that the church was other-worldly focused. Criticism was captured in the phrase, "pie in the sky, by and by." The dedication of religious groups to justice and full equality—the core of the Civil Rights movement—silenced those criticisms. These Christians believed God desired blessings for all people in the here and now—and that it was the responsibility of the people of God to secure them.

Today, our theology seems to have changed. In the interim between then and now, we have seen the dissolution of those fragile coalitions across racial and religious barriers. We have suffered the heresy of the prosperity Gospel, with its emphasis on the acquisition of wealth and the proof of God's favor shown to the rich. We have begun to blame the poor for their poverty and grown accustomed to laying claim to piety without sacrifice. As we remember that march, let us hear James' critique of our faith with newly opened ears. We have an opportunity to renew our claim to vital faith, to address the needs of the poor and to do more to establish justice in the land. Let us not miss this opportunity.

Day Eight

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

Isaiah 1:16-18

Always, always, God beckons us to lead better lives. Always, he encourages us. Sometimes, he threatens us with the withdrawal of His love. But, God's inability to finally forsake us, reveals those threats to be more the words of a frustrated parent who does not know what else to do. We are God's disobedient children. He made us free, so we are free to do as we wish, but God desires more for us and from us. "Come," he says, "let us reason together."

"Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." In other words, care for those most in need. Hearing these words, how can we be idle while the hungry are denied food, those without shelter denied housing, and those without health care denied insurance? Those who walked before us were tireless in challenging the government to serve the people. Today, we have lost sight of this basic

requirement of our human existence: that we not live as if we were on this planet alone. As Christians striving to honor God, we need to hold accountable the systems established to provide support and nurture to the people of God.

We must teach governments to treat the people of God with the respect God expects.

Day Nine

I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Psalm 78: 2b-4

Fifty years ago, we witnessed a small miracle. Thousands of Americans from all races and walks of life gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial to demonstrate concern and outrage over a lack of justice and basic rights for many Americans. The miracle was in the composition of the crowd—so many races, so many cities and towns represented. The miracle was in the movement that spawned the march—men and women who learned the power of non-violent resistance to evil forces and their courage and discipline in the face of cruelty inspired the nation and the world. The miracle was in the hearts and minds of those who marched; blacks in the south, in particular, had begun to truly believe that things could be different.

There was a miracle of faith, too. The faith of those mothers and fathers who were ensconced in involuntary servitude, spoken through silent prayers, stirring spirituals and nurtured in their hearts for centuries was finally bearing fruit. Finally, it seemed that Americans of African descent would be free. In the end, what did we learn? What are the lessons we have to tell today's young ones? What lasting truth can we extract from that glorious, storied time?

Because of that movement and the courage of so many whose names will never be spoken, all Americans now see the basic rights the marchers walked for as being deserved by them. Women, the differently abled, those whose first language is not English, and members and allies of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, now demand and reasonably expect that basic rights will not be denied them. This lesson is the fruit of the faith of those slave ancestors. In fact, this part of the story of African Americans was part of the proving ground for the very notion of human rights in the entire world. The true source of the miracle, however, was the spiritual strength of those southern blacks.

In the end, this is what we learned: Following the words of Jesus bears fruit. Amen.

Day Ten

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Jeremiah 29:7

This prophetic word from the book of Jeremiah was written to a group of leaders convinced that their presence in the unfamiliar, enemy territory of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was to be short-lived. According to these leaders, their exile was a temporary interruption of God's plan for victory for the people of Israel, and that victory, with the resulting return to Jerusalem, was imminent. Jeremiah heard another word. Their presence in the strange land was not contrary to the will of God but divine action. It was the land to which God had sent them into exile. They must carry themselves accordingly. They must invest themselves in the land where God sent them; in fact, they must actively seek its welfare, understanding that the blessings they expected for themselves would be entwined with the blessings, the welfare, of this new and unfamiliar land.

For many Americans of African descent, living in America has been like living in exile. And, as we have read Jeremiah's letter, we have come to understand that our welfare is inextricably bound up with the welfare of our country, this exiled land, this America. So, we have given our best, planting gardens—both metaphoric and actual—raising children, taking wives and sons for our children that they and we might increase. We have sought the welfare of this land with all that God has given us. For we understand that all of the blessings of our lives and the lives of our children will come from the work we do today.

Day Eleven

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God...Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God...I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Matthew 5:5, 8, 9, 39, 44b

Surely these words from Jesus are not meant literally. How quickly we run from the Sermon on the Mount. How easily we jump to rationalize those words and claim them as allegory or hyperbole. We reject some of these words out of hand: What is blessed about meekness? Why have a pure heart if that means letting others walk over you? Don't resist an evildoer? Surely he jests. Love your enemies? Jesus must have lived in a different neighborhood than any known today.

Any person who lived fifty years ago, or who grasps the wonder and miracle of those days, cannot escape these words and their literal application. Jesus said, "Do not resist evildoers. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." Fifty years ago, strong, determined, courageous black men and women meekly bore the fire hoses, snarling dogs, and vicious beatings of the unjust law and changed the nation. They were meek, but their meekness did not equate to passivity. They did not resist evildoers and their acts. They suffered at their hands, allowing them (and their cruelty) full freedom, believing that was the only way to love them. They showed their love by not allowing the cruelty to alter a determination to love. They loved the, even their enemies; they were peacemakers, and they were children of God.

Because we know those things to be true, can we be so bold as to claim anything other

than the full truth of that sermon?

Day Twelve

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.

Galatians 6:7-10a

The truth of this passage from Galatians is rooted deeply in the heart of African American spirituality. Even in casual spirituality, the law of reciprocity is affirmed and seems to be universally believed. We reap what we sow; what goes around, comes around. In the face of this inarguable truth, our only hope is God's forgiveness. May God's mercy deliver us from reaping what we sow. In the interim, until God's judgment and that final reaping, let us do our best. Let us sow and reap to the Spirit as long as God gives us strength to do so.

In the political sphere, what this means is that we must not tire of the fight at hand. We must demand justice, economically and legally. We must protect and safeguard our basic rights, including the right to vote. We need to grow ever more aware of the needs of the neediest and find creative ways to meet those needs. We are the heirs of a system of successful direct action through the March on Washington. We are the heirs of people who did not grow weary, who responded to the encouragement in Galatians. We should honor their commitment and recognize their wisdom. Let us not grow weary, even in this time of heightened fractiousness. Let us never grow weary in doing good for the people of God.



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