

“Reconciliation: Shining a Light on Forgiveness”

John Marson Dunaway

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What an honor to be asked to speak at the 26th annual Martin Luther King, Jr. breakfast! Yet as recently as twelve years ago it wouldn't have occurred to me even to attend this breakfast. My missionary friend Bruce McDonald had taken me on mission trips to Latvia and Kazakhstan, and I asked him to take me to a French-speaking country where I could speak their language. He was living in Nairobi at the time (this was in 2003), so he suggested we go to the Democratic Republic of Congo. I was totally unprepared for the experience that awaited me. The moment I set foot on African soil, I felt something happening inside. I'm talking about a physiological sensation of warmth in my chest. I was overcome with emotion. I didn't know exactly what was happening, but I did sense that this was a life-changing moment.

Africa is certainly a stunningly beautiful land, and the Congolese people were so very hospitable and welcoming. Our host, Robert Mango, is a pastor in the city of Goma, right on the border with Rwanda. He and I are still communicating with each other and praying for each other across the many miles. The people in Goma had asked me to speak at their university on the topic, “Do you Have a Dream for Congo?” using the biblical story of Joseph as well as Dr. King's dream.

After I got home from Congo, I read an article in the *Telegraph* by the Rev. Dr. Lonzie Edwards that called for better collaboration among churches across racial lines. Not long afterwards, I woke up in the middle of the night and told my wife Trish that I'd had a dream. In my dream I saw myself on the Mercer campus, where I had convened a group of clergy and scholars to explore the topic “Building the Beloved Community.” I said, “Trish, God is calling me to do this!” So I shared my dream with Lonzie and asked him to help me learn more about racial reconciliation. He has been a kind of mentor to me in the years since that dream.

The past twelve years have been a totally new stage in my career. I've read Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Malcolm X, and King. I've taught classes on “Race in America” and on West African literature. I've become sensitized to the many ways that the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow still weighs on black lives in this country. And, finally, I've come to understand and acknowledge the reality of White Privilege. I've also visited many of the African American churches in Macon and formed friendships with some black pastors that have enriched my life immeasurably. I've gotten to know people like Fred Shuttlesworth and John Perkins. In short, I've had a taste of Beloved Community and I think it's a wonderful thing to experience!

When you grow up in a firmly segregated Southern town where you have no black classmates or friends and the only people of color that you know are domestic servants, it takes a long time to gain some awareness of how those folks live. But God spoke to me in a dream, and my life hasn't been the same ever since.

I really like the theme that was chosen for this year's breakfast, “Reconciliation: Shining a Light on Forgiveness.” I've believed for a long time that forgiveness is the most powerful force available in opposing evil. When Jesus was hanging on that cross, the ultimate instrument of torture, and suffering the penalty for all of humanity's sins, he prayed for the Father to forgive his torturers. That shows us the key role of forgiveness.

In the very moment where our redemption was being accomplished, forgiveness was on his lips.

One of my favorite stories of forgiveness is the late Elwin Hope Wilson, of Rock Hill, SC. In 1961, Wilson was one of a mob of racists who attacked the Freedom Riders at the bus station in Rock Hill. Wilson brutally beat John Lewis, leaving him bleeding and bruised on the floor of the bus station. A Klan sympathizer in his younger days, he had burned crosses, hung a black doll in his driveway, and thrown a tire tool at a black youth. When asked where he would go when he died, he immediately replied, "To hell." But in his later years, he began to mellow. His son helped him come to see that he needed forgiveness. In 2009, at the age of 71, he travelled to Congressman Lewis's office in Washington and told him he was sorry for his actions and ashamed of them. Lewis unhesitatingly said, "I forgive you." That year Lewis and Wilson accepted the Common Ground Award for Reconciliation at the Canadian embassy in Washington, D.C. They were also honored in California with awards on Worldwide Forgiveness Day, and they told their story to Oprah Winfrey and millions of viewers. "I never had any idea this would occur, never thought it could happen," said Lewis. "This shows the power of love. Of grace. Of people being able to say I am sorry. I deeply appreciate it. This is meaningful."

Dr. King once said, "Be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process." King's prophecy has been realized in many Southern racists, but not many more dramatically than Elwin Wilson. It takes a lot of courage to ask forgiveness, and it can take just as much to grant it.

Many of you will probably recall the Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania in 2009. A milk truck driver named Charlie Roberts gunned down ten schoolgirls in a one-room Amish school house. Five of them died. Roberts had never been able to get over his bitterness at his first child's death just minutes after birth. Before starting to shoot he told the girls, "I'm angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with him."

"In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community didn't cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts' funeral." (<http://lancasterpa.com/amish/amish-forgiveness/>)

The Amish school shooting is a nightmarish memory. But the story of how those mourning Amish acted out their faith in the midst of severe trauma will endure as a monument to human magnanimity.

Let me recall one more recent example of how God uses offended humans to bring about reconciliation. I'm sure we all remember that terrible day in Charleston last summer when white supremacist Dylann Roof gunned down nine members of the

Mother Emanuel AME Church during a prayer meeting, including Pastor Clementa Pinckney, who had also served in the South Carolina legislature for 19 years.

Alana Simmons, who lost her grandfather, the Rev. Daniel Simmons, said the victims' families were determined not to respond in kind. Several Emanuel AME members showed up for Roof's initial hearing and spoke their forgiveness, thus overcoming their understandable rage. Simmons was one of the spokespersons. Her message for Roof was: "Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof — everyone's plea for your soul is proof they lived in love and their legacies will live in love, so hate won't win."

"I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor. "But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

It was encouraging to us all when the greater community of Charleston gathered for a prayer vigil. Even here in Macon, as well as in many other cities, I'm sure, African Americans and whites gathered to pray for the victims' families. Such responses as these show the way to reconciliation and Beloved Community.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, were he alive today, would certainly applaud these nonviolent responses to violence.

Only a few weeks ago, there was an ugly incident in which a Muslim mosque on Vineville Avenue was vandalized. Muslim terrorists are not to be tolerated, but to desecrate a place of worship out of religious bias is as serious as if it were done out of racial bias. I was so encouraged when I learned that the Rev. Cassandra Howe of the Unitarian Universalist Church had organized a show of solidarity in front of the mosque on the very next Friday when the worshippers were entering. At least 25 or 30 Maconites showed up in support of religious freedom. As I left the scene, a late-arriving Muslim worshipper thanked me very warmly and told me it meant a lot to them.

Just last month there was a nice editorial in the Telegraph written by Imam Adam Fofana expressing shame for Muslim terrorism and pointed out how such actions are in direct violation of the Koran. "Muslims worldwide are offended by terrorism that hijacks their religion," he wrote.

In an era of religious wars and terrorism, we need reminders of this kind of peace-making efforts, don't we?

Yes, in my childhood, the grip of Jim Crow injustices was firmly entrenched. What kind of man did God raise up to lead the movement to redress these injustices? It could so easily have been led by a hater, for the racial hatred that prevailed in the South was a powerful breeder of hate. We Americans are so blessed that it was a man steeped in the principles of the Gospel, a man who had the courage to accept redemptive suffering with grace. Here are a few quotations that exemplify the godly inspiration that animated his life and work:

"As we go back to the buses let us be loving enough to turn an enemy into a friend. We must move from protest to reconciliation." --Stride Toward Freedom

“It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing: ‘In Christ There Is No East or West.’” --Strength to Love

“I am told that within American Protestantism there are more than 250 denominations. The tragedy is not merely that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that many groups claim to possess absolute truth. ... God is neither Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Episcopalian. God transcends our denominations.” --STL

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. ... The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the abyss of annihilation.” ---STL

“Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.” --WCW

“I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the ‘do-nothingism’ of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest.” --WCW

“I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.” --WCW

[Still to be edited & probably cut to remain within 15 minutes. I don’t plan to use all the above MLK quotes]

Birmingham commitment card...