

MLK Sunday 2021 Reflection

VIRTUAL BACKDROP: “Flying Without Wings” by Maurice Evans



Jesus said, “I say to you that listen...”

Dr. Martin Luther King Day is a annual day of remembrance set aside as a day to honor the legacy of Dr. King by learning about the history of the Civil Rights Movement ...and about putting this into action with a day of serving others. It is a day to honor Dr. King by remembering those who are disenfranchised and those who have have not been afforded the full rights and privileges of being an American—privileges that many of us take for granted, like the air we breathe. On this day there are plenty of historians and social activists who have plenty to say to us about the issues of race and inequality in the United States and in the world. In terms of racial justice and the future, there are perhaps two important tasks ahead for this country: the task of recognizing racism in America and, the task of doing something about it. To quote Ibram X. Kendi,

***The only way to undo racism is to consistently identify it
and describe it, and then dismantle it.***

At its core, racism is a powerful system, that creates false hierarchies of human value.

...Racism intersects with class and culture and geography and even changes the way we see and value ourselves.

Because racism's debilitating and destructive powers seem so daunting and pervasive, I'd like to point to a recent publication that cuts to the quick—"How to Be An Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi. Kendi identifies a racist as one *who supports racist policies through their actions or inaction*. And, an antiracist as one *who supports antiracist polities through their actions*. His pragmatism gives a handle to the systemic burdens. This is the dismantling part. What about the identifying and describing part? What about the personal part—the individual and family stories that reveal how racism continues to shape and harm generations of people?

I want to pick up on five words from today's Gospel—

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen....

How simple yet how seldom we listen to one another. Listening requires quietness. Patience. Genuine listening requires a genuine desire to learn and understand. It requires a "letting go" of assumptions and prejudices... meaning pre-judging. It requires getting in touch with and recognizing that there are perspectives and experiences other than your own. It requires making room for others in your thinking and your perceiving.

Remember the words of this hymn...

*God be in my head, and in my thinking.
God be in my eyes, and in my looking.
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking.
God be in my heart, and in my understanding.*

This is a prayer for learning to listen. Ultimately, listening requires that we each admit that we don't know what we are doing! God help us. As Jesus hung upon the cross, he prayed,

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

How true this is for all of us. Listening ultimately requires the loving act of forgiveness—our willingness to forgive ourselves and forgive others. It requires that we want what God wants and dedicate ourselves to God's purposes.

Praying is about learning to listen. Reading is about learning to listen. Watching is about learning to listen. Listening promotes discovery and insight. Loving requires listening. We listen with our ears, our eyes, and our hearts.

*Listen to the song here in my heart
A melody I start but can't complete
Listen to the sound from deep within
It's only beginning to find release*

(Beyonce, 2006)

Just a year ago in January I went to Atlanta, Georgia to meet an artist whose work

I discovered online. As a writer, I hoped to see more of his work and to understand his perspective. I wanted to see the world through his eyes. Isn't that what artists do for us? They show us the world through their eyes. Maurice Evans is an accomplished African American artist who grew up in Tennessee—the son of a military man and musician. He is married to an artist he met in art school from Kenya—whose creativity is expressed through whimsical sculpture. His creativity is expressed through mixed media and photography. A walk through his gallery reveals ideas and imagery through a lens of bold colors, graceful images and abstract expressions. The vocabulary of his palette articulates unique expressions of music, culture, gender, and politics.

Look for a moment. And listen with your ears and eyes and heart to what Maurice Evans is saying. This piece is part of a series, visual social essays, entitled "Flying Without Wings." The figure in this piece is an African American woman sitting on a highway. Small blocks representing commercial trucks are seen in the distance behind her. She wears monarch butterfly wings and a white mask. She is interested in the bees who fly so easily. I wonder if you hear what she is saying? I wonder if you hear what the bees are saying? I wonder what the artist wants us to see and hear and feel?

(Time to look and hear the artwork)

At its core, racism is a powerful system that infects us all. It rips away the ability and the hope to fly free! Racism debilitates, undervalues, disenfranchises, and destroys. *Racism*

intersects with class and culture and geography and changes the way we see and value ourselves and each other. It shapes and misshapes our expectations and hopes.

What are we to do? How are we to heal? What needs to be said. Who needs to listen? Who has the answers? What restorations, what wings, will help each of us move forward —so that all of us can fly?

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