

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (Martin Luther King)

April 5, 1968

I have felt compelled to change the theme of my sermon tonight. I had planned to talk on "The Passover Plot", a book dealing with a great tragedy which occurred in the land of Palestine almost 2000 years ago. Instead I shall speak of an American tragedy which occurred in our land in the city of Memphis, Tennessee, last night. My heart and my conscience compelled me tonight to speak of the murder of the Reverend Martin Luther King. I speak with shame, with sorrow ~~and~~ with unshaken hope (~~determination~~)

I say first that I speak with shame. I love my country, I want to be proud of it. I like to ~~think of America as the land that kindled the light of liberty and hope for mankind.~~ I like to think of America as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty—proclaiming "Send me your poor, your tired your huddled masses yearning to breathe free". I like to think of America as symbolized by Abraham Lincoln: "With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in." I like to think of America as that great outpouring of people of all religions and all races who gathered in Washington in the famous March in 1963 to affirm their dedication to the cause of human rights, human freedom and dignity. This is the America I love.

But there is another America that we do not like to acknowledge but the reality of which forces itself upon us. What is it in America that makes for these outbursts of violence that fly in the face of all reason and negate the spirit of humanity? No monarch in England has died by violence in many centuries. In our national history of less than two centuries—how many Presidents have died at the hands of assassins. We speak of America as the land of the free—the land with freedom and justice for all. How many Americans white and black who stood up to make these ideals real have died at the hands of brutal bigots. With shame for my country I add to their roster the name of Martin Luther King.

True, you may say that these acts are committed

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sick

by ~~perverted~~ individuals with perverted minds. But there must be something in the climate of our country that encourages this kind of brutal, violent destruction. It was not only the hand of ~~Harvey Lee~~ Oswald that assassinated President Kenne-
It was the spirit of hatred and bigotry which seethed through Dallas and other cities of our country which gave impetus to that historic crime. It was not the sick mind of an unbalanced racist that conceived the murder of Dr. King - so senseless and meaningless in taking the life of the one greatest exponent of non-violence and moderation in the struggle for civil rights. It was the deep unspoken feeling, not only in the south but in the north as well, which, however camouflaged, resents the liberation and the equality of their dark-skinned fellow citizens.

When we were down in Selma Alabama in the summer of 1965, we saw this hatred and this lust for violence in the eyes of the men who followed our car with shotguns in the back window of theirs - one of them the man who barely a week later was to commit the cowardly murder of Jonathan Daniels, a brilliant dedicated young seminary student, who was riding with us that day. We heard it in the bitter hatred in the voices of those who tried to run us down as we ~~stepped~~ we walked across the driveway of a motel, and as we jumped aside shouted "Nigger Lovers" at us. I sense it when people tell me - "I don't have anything against negroes but if they move in property values are going to go down" or "I'm for equal rights but they want to get it too fast. They're not ready for it".

I recall that summer in 1965 Marcia and I were with Jonathan Daniels who a week later would be dead and Stokeley Carmichael. ~~And~~ We were working on Voter Registration in Lowndes county, the toughest county in the South. And Stokeley wanted me to meet an old negro preacher now completely blind. And the old preacher insisted that the only thing a bigot would respect is a gun - and the only way to meet force ~~xxxx~~ is by force. And Stokeley defended non-violence and insisted the only thing force would prove was who had the bigger gun. ^{ANd} the old preacher turned to me and asked -

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Rabbi, are you one of those non-violent fellows. And I answered that ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ while I admired the moral idealism of non-violence there are times when you must stand up and defend yourself. And I cited the example of the Jews in Israel. And we argued the issue. What made Stokely change- and turned him into the advocate of violence and Black Power. Did Jon's brutal murder have something to do with it? And if I were to meet him now what could I say to him. In the face of this tragic event when violence rears its head in the negro world- is it not because we have failed to control or even to punish violence in the white world. It is part of the American tragedy that we kill our noblest sons.

And I say, secondly, that I speak tonight with sorrow because so much has been lost in the death of Martin Luther King. I heard him a number of times but three stand out in my mind. One was at the Freedom March in Washington to which I alluded before. There he spoke for the American people because his dream was the American dream. And I heard him at the convention in Chicago of the U.A.H.C where he gave the main address at the closing banquet. He could have made a fatuous talk about brotherhood and made everybody feel self-satisfied. Instead he stirred the conscience of the thousand delegates there - reminding them that civil rights are human rights- that the struggle for them is everybody's struggle- and their denial is everybody's guilt. And I remember his talk at the closing meeting of the SELC Conference in Birmingham in August of 1965. We met Jon and Stokely there again. The audience there was largely negro. Not long before a bomb had been thrown into a church in Birmingham and four little negro children had been killed. Only a week before the Voter Registration Bill had been passed in Congress and we were heady with victory. It was a perfect opportunity for demagogery - King could have appealed to his audience- roused their emotions- they were ready to respond to anything he said. Instead he spoke about Vietnam. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ He pointed out that it diverted effort from the home tasks- but more important that it was a denial of basic moral principles. He spoke not just as a negro but as an American prophet.

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Martin Luther King dared to apply his religious principles literally. Some of the more extremist elements in the negro world condemned him as an Uncle Tom- which to them is the ultimate insult. They felt he was not militant enough. The fact is that Martin Luther King was extremely militant. His non-violence did not mean passive acceptance of wrong. He stood up fearlessly against discrimination, against denial of civil rights - for freedom and equality. And in this struggle he was attacked and he was beaten he was jailed- but he insisted for himself and for his followers that they would not strike back. And on this basis- he had won battle after battle- (the right to sit in buses wherever there was a seat- the right to sit at lunch counters- the right to use municipal swimming pools * the right to attend public theaters). Like Ghandi in India- non-violence became an example of the power of the spirit. Let me say that it works only where people against whom you stand have a basic sense of humanity. It seemed to be working. But now this comes - and one wonders - It was such a meaningless, destructive act. Martin Luther King was ~~the~~ ~~great~~ ^{the} leader of the forces of moderation in the negro world. It was in men like him that there was hope that our problems could be solved without bloodshed. If his murderer had wanted to stimulate rioting and violence- he could not have chosen a more effective way.

Dr. King did ^{not} ~~do~~ ~~as~~ ~~much~~ ~~as~~ ~~any~~ ~~man~~ ~~of~~ ~~our~~ ~~generation~~ ~~to~~ ~~make~~ ~~real~~ ~~the~~ ~~ideal~~ ~~of~~ ~~humanity~~. In a tragic hour in our community some weeks ago I used a story by the South African novelist, Olive Schreiner. It is called the Artist's Secret. It tells of an artist whose work was distinguished by a strange shade of red- lifelike, pulsating. Others grieved to copy it without success. He went on painting picture after picture- all with that same glowing color- and as time passed he became pale and ~~thin~~ but he continued relentlessly at his work. One night he died. His colleagues searched his studio hoping they might find the mystery of the Artist's secret but there was nothing. But the author concludes- if they had examined his body they would

have seen beneath his heart a fresh wound - now closed in death. He had been painting with his life's blood. Dr. Martin Luther King consciously gave his life for his cause. His loss is part of our ~~American tragedy~~. *Sorrow of America*

But finally I speak tonight with hope. Like Anne Frank who said- Despite everything I still believe that man is good at heart, I say, despite everything I still believe that the American dream is not a fantasy. It hurts so much to realize that he was only 39 years old. Truly this is an example of an unfinished life. ~~But it is not the destiny of all idealists. The great tasks of mankind are continuous - they must be carried on by generation after generation. Each advances the cause as far as time and strength permit and then passes on - finding comfort only in the realization that others will continue.~~

~~Was~~ Abraham Lincoln's life unfinished. He had spent four crucial years leading his country in a terrible war to preserve the union and to emancipate the slave. He died ~~before~~ before he could see the fruits of his labors. ~~Decades~~ were to pass ~~while~~ while his dream remained a dream. But whatever progress has been made in our day toward human equality is the continuation of the work of Abraham Lincoln. Was the life of Theodore Herzl an unfinished one. For eight years- he burned himself out to gain a homeland for his people. He met bitter opposition from within and without. Finally he died his work unfinished. But the living state of Israel today is the continuation of the work of Theodore Herzl. Was the life of ^{Moses} ~~him~~ an unfinished life. Forty years he spent guiding his people in the wilderness. And then he died on the far shore- never privileged to set foot in the promised land which was his goal. But wherever the Jewish faith and people live today- ~~the spirit of Moses lives on with them.~~

Dr. King had a premonition of his death. Only the day before in Memphis he had said

"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

The ancient Rabbis understood it when they said: Lo alecho hamelacha ligmor elo aincha ben chorim - hibatel mimenu - It is not for you to complete the work. Yet thou art not free to desist from it. He followed that principle. And so must we. If we are sincere in our sense of outrage and sorrow - we must vindicate this life so tragically cut short by strengthening the cause of human love, and brotherhood, of ~~unequal~~ equality and justice, of peace and goodwill ~~xxx~~ which he served ~~xxx~~ with such utter dedication. This is the task. And this is our hope. If this task is to be stifled and this hope crushed by a bullet from a gun - then all is lost and America is lost - and it won't be worth saving. His dream must be our dream and we must make that dream real. Let us hear it in his own words as ~~xxx~~ I heard it on that memorable day in Washington almost five years ago.

(TAPE RECORDING - I HAVE A DREAM)

I remember in Jerusalem the day the old city was liberated ~~xxx~~ we had gone down to the Mandelb Gate Gate to welcome the returning soldiers. And then we came back to our building where the border police had been quartered with us during the fight. It was a great and historic hour. And suddenly we realized that we were there - five of us all American - and for some strange reason we wanted to proclaim the fact that we in this time of destiny we share as Americans. ~~What~~ And as we came up the steps we started to sing - we didn't sing God Bless America or My country tis of thee. Almost instinctively reached out - grasped each others hands and entered the building singing We Shall Overcome - a song

of the civil rights movement first made popular by the followers of Dr. Martin Luther King. Somehow we felt this was the spirit of America- it was the expression of eternal hope and faith of our country.