

Community Church of Issaquah
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Five Life Lessons I Have Learned from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Tomorrow we will observe Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. That's not actually his birthday, today is, but it's the way we do business in the US – the Monday closest to the date is the date we observe it because we all hate to work on Mondays. I like that. I could have written the Karen Carpenter song, "Rainy days and Mondays always get me down" because here in Washington, they are usually the same.

But as we approach this celebration and remembrance of the life of this remarkable man, I wonder if most of us really know much about him, so let me give you a little trivia. You can use it to impress your friends with how smart you are.

- Do you know Martin Luther King's birth name? Bet you don't. It's Michael King. His father changed his name to honor the German reformer Martin Luther.
- Did you know he was relatively short at 5'7"?
- Did you know that when he was 10 years old, he sang in his church choir in Atlanta at the premier of the movie "Gone with the Wind"?
- Did you know that he skipped grades 9 and 12 and didn't officially graduate from Booker T. Washington High School before he began his college career at Morehouse College at age 15?
- Following his graduation with this doctorate degree from Boston University, he became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama at age 25!

- Dr. King was aligned with the American Baptist Church Conference - our denomination.
- And did you know that at age 26 he organized and led the Montgomery Bus Boycott that began because of Rosa Parks' arrest? The boycott lasted 385 days.
- Did you know that he was only 28 years old when he founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?
- Dr. King was only 35 when he received the Nobel Peace Prize shortly after the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 was passed.
- Did you know that he never endorsed a single candidate in his lifetime? He once admitted to having voted for John Kennedy but did not endorse him.
- Do you know who Dr. King credited for the greatest influence on his nonviolent approach to civil disobedience? Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy.
- And did you know that he was only 39 when he was assassinated, having accomplished the majority of his work in a little over ten years.
- Dr. King would have been 94 years old today.

I consider myself a very fortunate individual. I was raised in Mississippi and spent my college years in Birmingham, Alabama. That's NOT why I consider myself fortunate, by the way! I am fortunate because I experienced firsthand the integration of schools; the rise of the Civil Rights Movement; the jailing of Dr. King in Birmingham; the use of attack dogs and fire hoses on demonstrators by the Birmingham Police Chief, Bull Connor; I lived under the governorship of George Wallace and his replacement wife, Lurleen; I knew personally about the three Selma marches; I tracked the murders of the 3 civil rights workers in Mississippi by the KKK; and so much more.

I watched with keen interest the black and white television reporting of all the news, and I struggled to sort through my own feelings and thoughts. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the lessons I learned during those young years of my life, especially about the world in which I lived then and now. So I have Dr. King to thank for teaching me some life lessons that I have held onto all these years, and I'd like to share a few of them with you this morning. As a striving Christian, I am forever grateful that Dr. King taught me how to be a better believer.

First, I learned that we are not born with prejudice or hate. We learn that – from society, family, friends, or others.

- A Mississippi white person was not born with an innate prejudice or hatred for blacks
- A Palestinian was not born hating Jews
- The Hutus of Rwanda were not born hating the Tutsis

But these attitudes of evil do exist and have since the beginning of time. Neighbor against neighbor, nation against nation, tribe against tribe. All bigotry, all prejudice, all hatred has been learned from someone. That's how it all begins.

I grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. My mother once said that when I moved from Mississippi to Alabama as a high school senior, it raised the IQ in both states. I never knew what she meant by that, do you? But anyway, I can tell you this: even though I grew up in one of the most racially divided places in the world, I did not learn to hate any black person I knew. My parents were low income, mostly under-educated, hard working employees of a grocery store, so I and my siblings were raised by a maid. Her name was Josephine, and I shudder to think now as an adult how little my parents paid her. But Miss Josephine and Mister Albert, her husband, always seemed to me to be just like me. I gave no thought to my going home with Miss Josephine, riding with her

in the back of the bus. I loved her as if she were my own family, which in truth, she was. She would probably say I only loved her because she made me donuts, but that's only partially true.

My father, however, never stopped using the N word when he referred to Blacks, and my mother, who was much more "Christian" in her approach always called her black associates "Colored People." In a conversation once shortly before her death, she made the statement, "I'm going to call Miss Lula and see if she can come help me clean." When I asked who Miss Lula was, my mother replied, "Oh, you know, the colored lady." She was not happy with me when I said, "Oh really? What color is she?" I've always been sassy. It's odd that those prejudices never came to dwell in my heart even though I witnessed it day in and day out growing up. I thank God for dwelling in my heart and blocking that hatred.

Second I learned that all humankind has some level of prejudice. We may try to deny it, but we all do have some – you, me, all of us. If you don't think so, try this on for size:

- Some people are intolerant of pious Christians who often ruin our name.
- Some people are prejudiced against those who remain ignorant by choice. I have those in my family. You might also.
- Some people have a strong disliking for others who don't measure up to their standards or aren't nice like us.
 - How do you feel when you are approached by someone on the street asking for money or a handout?
 - How do you feel when you learn a politician has received substantial donations from the coal industry and you oppose coal train depots?

We all have these prejudices in our lives and often ignore them.

Third, I learned that if I choose to repay evil with evil, then only evil wins. We all know about that old saying, “An eye for an eye. . .” So what does that get us? Maybe a black patch and some reading glasses, but little else. Dr. King chose a civil disobedient form of protest. It landed him in jail, caused him to get beaten several times, to be spit on, called unimaginable names and more, but he chose not to retaliate. His life reflected what he believed about the life of Jesus and he faithfully followed that example of love instead of hate.

The founding leaders of every major faith and religion, including Islam, have advocated that its followers practice non-violence. I have learned that Dr. King was so right when he said, “Let no man pull you low enough to hate him.” Patience is not one of my finer qualities, so this is an area in which I must work hard to follow. Do you know how hard it was for me to sit in a room full of fundamentalist Christians in Tupelo, Mississippi, and listen to them call me liar, murderer, hypocrite and worse – and not be able to make a single hand gesture or comment? I remembered Dr. King’s admonition that I must not repay evil with evil. “Be ye kind, one to another, forgiving one another even as I have forgiven you” as Jesus taught us.

Fourth, I learned that I must look beyond color, beyond status, beyond education and beyond heritage to try hard to see each person as just that – an individual with a unique story. My mother would have been and usually was judged as a poor white woman from Mississippi. She told people she was from Durant, Mississippi, a small town about 60 miles north of Jackson. She disliked it when I corrected her and told folks that she really grew up in a small community called Possum Neck. So what did Beverly Aldridge Lachina accomplish? She raised five highly educated and successful children. She had a faithful life devoted to

others and Christ. At her funeral, one woman after another would come up to me or a sibling and say, “I was your mother’s best friend.” There were no fewer than 20 of those. How did my mother make each one feel that special? She was amazing, but to look at her, you would never know any of this.

Sam Berns died at the age of 17. Sam had a very rare aging disease, and though he was just a teenager, he had the appearance of someone closer to 100. He weighed 50 pounds at his death, wore big glasses, had no hair and big ears. People would turn away to keep from looking at him. A film crew followed his life from age 13 to 16. He told the documentarians, “I didn’t put myself in front of you to have you feel bad for me. You don’t need to feel bad for me. Because I want you to get to know ME.” Each of us is a unique child of God and blessed because of that.

Martin Luther King said it this way, “No matter what I choose to become, I believe that I can change the world and as I’m striving to change the world, I will be happy.” Every person in this room has a unique story to tell about striving to change the world and be happy. We need to pay better attention and listen, listen, listen. We are a wonderful family of faith and children of God.

Finally, I have learned that my life will be measured not by its length of days or minutes, but by what I did with those days and minutes to help other people. I became a minister more than 58 years ago simply because I believed that I was given a servant’s heart. I didn’t ask for that. I have always wanted to be able to say something or do something that would help someone move through a challenging or difficult time. It’s been my calling in my life, and it has given me meaning and purpose. I try hard to do what God has called me to do for others, and I hope that they will do the same for me.

I am quite certain that I will never accomplish in my lifetime a fraction of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did with his life in a short 11 year span of time, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that each of us realize that from the smallest act to the grandest gesture, our lives matter most when we are doing for others. I am thankful for the life of this man who taught me much. I trust he has taught you something as well. He was not a perfect man, but neither are we. But he was, and so are you, perfectly fine just as you are. Celebrate that as we honor the life of a Christian brother who used God's messages to teach us much.