

CALLED TO LOVE AND SERVE HUMANITY: A VISION UNFULFILLED

JUDGE WAVNY TOUSSAINT



MARTIN LUTHER KING BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

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INTRODUCTION

In a year when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have been 76 years old, the Civil Rights impetus fading dimly with the passing decades, the political climate unleashing bubonic plagues on the health of Black America, and the hope of the marginalized besieged by an incessant assault on affirmative action initiatives, Judge Wavny Toussaint reminded the audience that the Vision is yet unfulfilled. The event was the 4th Annual Celebration of Martin Luther King's Birthday held at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City.

Quietly acceding to her confessed lack of preaching experience, Wavny however was able to employ her legal mind to weave a defense of her thesis. With this scholarly indictment of the systemic injustices that relentlessly impugn the victims for their unfortunate conditions, there is not much room for ambiguity concerning the state of Black America in 2005. When the judge concluded her analysis she prophetically pleaded for the jury to self-examine its own position on social justice. She concluded, "Ask yourself, 'Who will feed the hungry, if I don't? Who will clothe the naked, if I don't? Who will shelter the homeless, if I don't? What will happen to the sick, if I don't visit them? Who will be concerned about those in prison and those on their way there, if you're not? Who will provide treatment for the drug and alcohol addicted, if you don't? Where is your compassion for the HIV and AIDS afflicted?'"

We express gratitude to Judge Wavny Toussaint for the honest exposition of a question left unanswered, yet which seeks our exclusive attention at the genesis of the 21st century.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. Wavny', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

BIO

Elected in 2002 as a judge of the Civil Court of the City of New York, Wavny Toussaint currently serves as a judge of the New York City Criminal Court in Brooklyn. After graduation with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the City College of New York, Ms Toussaint attended Howard University School of Law, where she received a Juris Doctor, cum laude. During her years of practice as a lawyer, Ms. Toussaint served as an Assistant Corporation Counsel for the City of New York, an associate at a private law firm, and as principal law clerk to a justice of the New York State Supreme Court, Kings County.

Ms. Toussaint has an outstanding record of involvement with professional organizations. She is a former president and board member of the Association of Black Women Attorneys, currently serves as a board member of the Metropolitan Black Bar Association, and is an active member of the National Bar, and the Brooklyn Women's Bar Associations. She previously served on the Torts Litigation Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the Committee on Minorities and the Law of the New York County Lawyers Association and as a Small Claims Arbitrator for the Civil Court of the City of New York.

Wavny Toussaint has always been interested in her community, especially the children. To that end, she served as a mentor to high school students in the Legal Outreach College Preparatory Program. Since 1996 she has been the board president of the Protestant Board of Guardians Inc., a social service organization that provides family preservation and foster care services. She is presently the chairperson of the Beulah Church of the Nazarene Scholarship Committee, and the Policies and Procedure Committee. At Beulah, she also serves on the trustee board, sings in one of the choirs and, is a board member of Hope City Empowerment Center, one of the church's community outreach programs. Ms Toussaint also serves as a trustee of Eastern Nazarene College located in Quincy, Massachusetts, and is a member of two ecumenical women's organizations, the Women's Empowerment Movement and Church Women United.

Ms. Toussaint an immigrant from the Caribbean island of Trinidad and the first Trinidadian-American to be elected to office in New York State; resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Called to Love and Serve Humanity: A Vision Unfulfilled

Before I was born, before I knew America existed.

Before my parents came to these great United States.

Before my mother, Rev. Zena Toussaint, became a Nazarene.

Before she became a minister and before she became an elder.

Before I went to college and law school.

Before I practiced law for twenty years, and before I became a judge, there was a man who asked America to love and serve humanity. His vision is yet unfulfilled.

Good morning, members of the clergy, elected officials, students, fellow Nazarenes, and, in case I missed any one, ladies and gentlemen. I am humbled that you have chosen me to speak at this birthday celebration service for Martin Luther King, Jr. I also want to thank you because your invitation enabled me to research Dr. King from a different perspective. It was an enlightening experience.

The average person would agree with this description of Dr. King: He was a minister, an African-American, and a leader in the civil rights struggle of the 1950's and 1960's. He believed in the use of non-violent protest to achieve equality for people of color and the poor. He was a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and; as a principal speaker at the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom he described his dream. He dreamed of an America where an individual is judged not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character. Finally, he was assassinated on April 4, 1968 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. I purposely started my description of Dr. King with the word "minister." For you invited me to speak about a minister here at the Nazarene Theological Seminary, where ministers are

trained. Don't you realize I'm not a minister? You might have been better off inviting my mom, who is the minister, to speak. However, since I am a lawyer and have been trained to believe that I can speak on behalf of others much better than they can speak for themselves, I guess I can talk about a minister.

Now every good lawyer knows before you speak you must do your research. So, I researched Dr. King as a minister through his own words, as reflected in his sermons. Frankly, my research enlightened and saddened me. For Dr. King's sermons appealing to American Christians to love and serve humanity are as timely today as they were almost fifty years ago. Things change, but yet they remain the same.

The sermons I will use as I speak were published in a recent book, *A Knock At Midnight: Inspiration From The Great Sermons Of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.* Because Dr. King's words so eloquently define our responsibility to love and serve humanity, I will be using much of his own words for the rest of my speech.

In the 1956 sermon [before I was born] titled "Paul's Letter To American Christians," he states: American Christians, I must say to you as I said to the Roman Christians years ago, "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."... You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity, both in heaven and earth. Therefore, your ultimate allegiance is not to the government, not to the state, not to nation, not to any man-made institution. The Christian owes his ultimate allegiance to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it. You must never allow the transitory evanescent [that is, the quickly disappearing] demands of man-

made institutions [or governmental administrations] to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God.

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as capitalism. Through this economic system, you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built, up the greatest system of production that history has ever known. All of this is marvelous. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism. I still contend that money can be the root of all evil. It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism. I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life. You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary and the size of the wheel base of your automobile, rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

The misuse of capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in your nation. They tell me that one tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of the wealth. O America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes? If you are to be a truly Christian nation, you must solve this problem. You can use your powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth. God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous, inordinate wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty. God intends for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life, and, he has left in this universe "enough and to spare" for that purpose. So I call upon you to bridge the gulf between abject poverty and superfluous wealth.

Let me rush on to say something about the Church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the Church is the Body of Christ. So when the Church is true to

its nature, it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ. They tell me that in America you have within Protestantism more than two hundred and fifty-six denominations. The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, [and in 2005 a growing number of non-denominational Protestants], but that most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth. This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ. You must come to see that God is neither a Baptist nor a Methodist. He is neither a Presbyterian nor an Episcopalian. [And in case you were wondering he is neither Nazarene nor Pentecostal]. God is bigger than all of our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that, America.

There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American Church. You have a white church and you have a Negro church. [Today, we say a black church or a minority church.] You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at 11:00 on Sunday morning to sing “All Hail The Power Of Jesus Name” and “Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind,” you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America. They tell me that there is more integration in the entertaining world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is!

Ladies and gentlemen, how sad that a sermon initially preached before I was born remains fully applicable today.

Dr King’s message to love and serve humanity continues in a 1967 version of the sermon, “A Knock At Midnight.” It covers the parable found in Luke, chapter 11, of the man who at midnight begs for three loaves of bread from a friend to feed another traveling friend.

Midnight, according to Dr. King, “is the hour when men desperately seek to obey the 11th commandment, ‘Thou shalt not get caught.’ According to the ethic of midnight, the cardinal sin is to be caught and the cardinal virtue is to get by. It is all right to lie, but one must lie with great finesse. [It was a lie about weapons of mass destruction that took us to war in Iraq]. It is all right to steal, if one is so dignified that if caught, the charge becomes embezzlement not robbery [Enron, Martha Stewart]. It is permissible even to hate, if one so dresses his hating in the garments of love that hating appears to be loving [for example, the organized challenges to decimate affirmative action programs promoting gender and racial justice by using civil rights laws to protect white men] .

Dr King continues: As in the parable, so in our world today, the deep darkness of midnight is interrupted by the sound of a knock on the door of the Church. Millions of people knock. In this country the roll of church members is longer than ever before. More than one hundred and fifteen million people are at least paper members of some church. . . . This numerical growth should not be overemphasized. We must not be tempted to confuse spiritual power and large numbers. Jumboism, as someone has called it, is an utterly fallacious standard for measuring positive power. An increase in quantity does not automatically bring an increase in quality. A larger membership does not necessarily represent a correspondingly increased commitment to Christ. Almost always, the creative, dedicated minority has made the world better. But although a numerical growth in church membership does not necessarily reflect a concomitant increase in ethical commitment, millions of people do feel that the Church provides an answer to the deep confusion that encompasses their lives. It is still the one familiar landmark where the weary traveler by midnight comes. It is the one house which stands where it has always stood. . . . The many who come and knock are desperately seeking a little bread to tide them over.

The traveler asks for three loaves of bread. He wants the bread of faith. . . . Men have lost faith in God, faith in man, and faith in the future. . . . There is also a deep longing for the bread of hope. . . . Many [have] concluded that life has no meaning . . . or that life is an endless pain with a painful end. And there is the deep longing for the bread of love. Everybody wishes to love and be loved. He who feels that he is not loved feels that he does not count. Much has happened in the modern world to make men feel that they do not belong.

When the man in the parable knocked on his friend's door and asked for the three loaves of bread, he received the impatient retort, "Do not bother me. The door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything." How often have men experienced a similar disappointment when at midnight they knock on the door of the Church? Millions of Africans [and other peoples of color] patiently knocking on the door of the Christian church, where they seek the bread of social justice, have either been altogether ignored or told to wait until later, which almost always means never. . . . In the terrible midnight of war, men have knocked on the door of the Church to ask for the bread of peace, but the Church has often disappointed them. . . . A weary world, pleading desperately for peace, has often found the Church morally sanctioning war. Those who have gone to the Church to seek the bread of economic justice have been left in the frustrating midnight of economic privation. In many instances, the Church has so aligned itself with the privileged classes and so defended the status quo that it has been unwilling to answer the knock at midnight.

The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool. If the Church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the Church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the Church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace. Men far and near will know the Church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at night.

I now turn to a 1965 sermon exemplified by my own life and the bedrock of my profession, titled "The American Dream." The American Dream is found in those majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, words lifted to cosmic proportions: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by God, creator, with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". This is a dream. It's a great dream.

The first thing we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It doesn't say "some men;" it says "all men." It doesn't say all "white men;" it says "all men," which includes black men. It does not say "all Gentiles;" it says "all men," which includes Jews. It doesn't say "all protestants;" it says "all men," which includes Catholics [and might I add Muslims]. It doesn't even say "all theists and believers;" it says "all men," which includes humanists and agnostics.

This morning I would like to deal with some of the challenges that we face today in our nation as a result of the American Dream. First, I want to reiterate the fact that we are challenged more than ever before to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. We are challenged to really believe that all men are created equal. And don't misunderstand. It does not mean that all men are created equal in terms of native endowment, in terms of intellectual capacity. It doesn't mean that. There are certain bright stars in the human firmament in every field. . . . There are individuals who do excel and rise to the height of genius in their areas and in their fields. What it does mean is that all men are equal in intrinsic worth.

You see, the Founding Fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the imago dei, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him [a] uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.

And I tell you this morning, my friends, the reason we got to solve this problem here in America is because God somehow called America to do a special job for mankind and the world. Never before in the history of the world have so many racial groups and so many national backgrounds assembled together in our nation. And somehow if we can't solve the

problem in America, the world can't solve the problem, because America is the world in miniature and the world is America writ large.

Now that doesn't only apply on the race issue; it applies on the class question. You know, sometimes a class system can be as vicious and evil as a system based on racial injustice. When we say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and when we live it out, we know, as I say so often, that the "no d" is as significant as the "ph d." And the man who has been to "no house" is as significant as the man who's been to Morehouse [or Olivet or Trevecca or Eastern Nazarene house.]

Finally, I conclude with a portion of a 1967 sermon titled, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." According to Dr. King, those three dimensions are length, breadth and height. Now, the length of life as we shall use it here is the inward concern for one's own welfare. In other words, it is that inward concern that causes one to push forward, to achieve his own goals and ambitions. The breadth of life as we shall use it here is the outward concern for others. And the height of life is the upward reach for God. Now, you got to have all three of these to have a complete life.

On the issue of the breadth of life that is the outward concern for others, Dr. King turned to the parable of the Good Samaritan. These are his words: One day Jesus told a parable. You will remember that parable. He had a man that came to him to talk with him about some very profound concerns. And they finally got around to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And this man wanted to debate with Jesus. This question could have very easily ended up in thin air as a theological or philosophical debate. But you remember Jesus immediately pulled that question out of thin air and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho.

He talked about a certain man who fell among thieves. Two men came by, and they just kept going. And then finally another man, a member of another race, who stopped and helped him. And that parable ends up saying that this Good Samaritan was a great man. He was a good man because he was concerned about more than himself. . . .

The first question that the Levite asked was, “if I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But the Good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question. Not, “what will happen to me if I stop to help this man?” But, “what will happen to this man if I do not stop to help him?” That was why this man was good and great. He was great because he was willing to take a risk for humanity. He was willing to ask, “What will happen to this man?” Not “what will happen to me?”

This is what God needs today: men and women who will ask “ what will happen to humanity if I don’t help?”. . . This is how God judges people in the final analysis. . . . Somewhere along the way we must learn that there is nothing greater than to do something for others.

Ladies and gentleman, you made a decision to acknowledge this country’s celebration of a man who epitomized the topic you selected, “Called To Love And Serve Humanity.” I have shared with you his vision of your responsibility from the words of his own sermons. It is almost forty years after his last words were uttered. Look around you. Watch it on TV. Listen to the news. Read it in the faces of your fellow man. Dr. King’s vision has not been fulfilled.

Ask yourself, “Who will feed the hungry, if I don’t? Who will clothe the naked, if I don’t? Who will shelter the homeless, if I don’t? What will happen to the sick, if I don’t visit them?” Who will be concerned about those in prison and those on their way there, if you’re not? Who will

provide treatment for the drug and alcohol addicted, if you don't? Where is your compassion for the HIV and AIDS afflicted?

In celebrating the man, are you willing to see his vision fulfilled? Will "Paul's Letter To American Christians" find you worshipping with an exclusive or inclusive congregation? Are you prepared to provide the bread of hope, faith, and love in answer to "A Knock at Midnight"? Do you truly believe in "The American Dream" that all men are created equal? Are the three dimensions of your life complete? Have you embraced the breadth of life, that is, the outward concern for others? Is your question, "What will happen to this man, if I do not help?" Not, "What will happen to me?" Will you answer the call to love and serve humanity?

Thank you, ladies and gentleman, for the opportunity to share with you.