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A Greater Determination

April 3, 1968. The weather that night was violent and mean. Thunder, lightening, rain. Martin Luther King did not feel well that night. He was tired. Body, soul and mind. He did not want to speak that night. But the people wanted him; the crowd expected him. Destiny insisted. And so he went out into the threatening night, went to the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee and preached his final sermon.

At the nadir of his public life, King faced criticism for his opposition to the war in Vietnam, and for his plan for a poor people's march in Washington, D.C. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were planning their most radical protests to date. There were discussions about disrupting D.C. traffic, thereby causing a paralysis of the nation's capital. However, the most radical aspect of the poor people's campaign was the plan to bring people together across racial lines. Black, brown, red, white, yellow all coming together to protest poverty, to come together to challenge certain economic assumptions in the United States.

These assumptions include the notion that free market capitalism is the best economic system for human flourishing. It is a presumption that people have an equal opportunity to prosper if they are hard-working, thrifty, and disciplined. The less obvious realities are the ways government is involved to the economic benefit of the wealthy. Some people, who at one moment insists upon a laissez faire economic relationship between corporations and the state, will at another moment ask for and accept subsidies, bailouts and tax breaks for their businesses. Many of these same people will deny aid to the poor on the grounds that such aid represents the state's willingness to pay the consequences for immoral behavior.

King argued for a social democratic political economy. He thought this was a kind of Hegelian synthesis between capitalism and socialism. He did not want to see the totalitarian violence of the Soviet Union come to the United States, but he did want everyone in the society to have a job and a basic income that enabled them to live above the poverty line. Further, King saw the struggle for equality and justice in the United States, including distributive, economic justice, as part of an international insistence upon freedom. The struggle for freedom in the United States was part of a postcolonial *zeitgeist*. In the sermon he preached on that stormy April 3rd night, he saw the struggle in Memphis related to the struggle for freedom in Johannesburg, Nairobi, Accra, New York, Atlanta, and Jackson, Mississippi. He said: "the cry is always the same- 'we want to be free'" (280). He spoke of the necessity for nonviolence saying "It's nonviolence or nonexistence" (280). He said that without the international human rights movement that the world is doomed. This revolution meant a recognition of the human dignity of peoples of color across the globe. King says: "We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We

are determined to be people. We are saying that we are God's children. And that we don't have to live like we are forced to live" (280).

King here reminded the people of their ultimate identity. Using the vocabulary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the penultimate and the ultimate, King did not stop with penultimate identities based upon race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or nation. He articulated an ultimate identity as children of God. This reminds us that we are created in the image and the likeness of God and because of this, we are entitled to respect and I say even reverence. For King this was a call for unity. He also wanted to use this moment as an opportunity to exhort the people to keep their focus on the injustices that they were organizing to confront. He warned against falling into the trap of distraction from the main issues.

This was King's second trip to Memphis in relation to the sanitation worker's strike. He had led a march that had turned violent, and now he returned to lead a nonviolent march. He wanted to show that nonviolence was still an effective tactic to shine a light on injustice. He said:

Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be. And force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue. And we've got to say to the nation: we know it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory. (281)

He recounted the history of other marches in Birmingham where people faced dogs, the force of water from fire hoses, the indignity of being forced into paddy wagons and thrown into jail.

And King said they kept on singing: “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me round. . . Over my head I see freedom in the air. . . We shall overcome.” And he spoke of the jailers who were moved by the prayers and songs. He reminded them of the victory of Birmingham. He reminded his audience of their rights under the Constitution. He reminded them of America’s social contract with her citizens: freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of the press.

Further, in a passage that gets little notice when we think of this sermon, he called attention to the role of ministers of the Gospel. He instructed them to be prophetic in their ministries. He said:

We need all of you. And you know what’s beautiful to me, is to see all of these ministers of the Gospel. It’s a marvelous picture. Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Somehow, the preacher must say with Jesus, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with problems of the poor.” (282)

He thanked the ministers present and spoke about the importance of a relevant ministry; he reminded the people of the importance of a social gospel that seeks to improve the lives of people on earth, in the here and now and not only in the great by and bye. He said:

It’s alright to talk about “long white robes over yonder,” in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s alright to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a

day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do. (280)

In the final sermon, King also calls for direct action that takes the form of "economic withdrawal." He spoke of the economic power of Black America, being larger than the national budgets of some nations. He called for economic boycotts of some companies as a way to "redistribute the pain" (283). He wanted to call attention to unfair hiring practices at these companies and he wanted to enlist their support on behalf of the sanitation workers. He also called on the people to support Black institutions – banks, insurance companies and others. He wanted to build an economic base. He said: 'Now these are some practical things we can do. We begin the process of building a greater economic base. And at the same time, we are putting pressure where it really hurts. I ask you to follow through here' (283).

He exhorted the people to stand in solidarity with the sanitation workers. He said: "Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we go down together" (284). He called for a "dangerous unselfishness" (284). He then told the parable of the Good Samaritan who helped an injured man on the Jericho Road. He described the road as a dangerous road. He reminded the people that the Good Samaritan who stopped to help the injured man "had the capacity to project the "I" into the "thou" and to be concerned about his brother. This for me is the definition of love. Love does not ask the question: what will happen to me if I do this good thing for the other. Love asks the question what will happen to the other if I do not? King asks his audience to make this reversal. And so he said:

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination.

And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation. And I want to thank God once more for allowing me to be here with you. (285)

A greater determination. King here is using that term in the sense of an intent and a resolve. A resolute movement toward a goal. However, the polysemy, the multiple meanings of the word determination takes us to other possibilities of meaning. The Latin root of the word determine is *determinare*; this means to limit. It is *de + terminus* which indicates a boundary. Thus, in one sense a determination is a decision, a definition that sets the limits, that sets the boundaries of a matter. This meaning comes to the fore when we think of determination as coming to a decision. A judicial body or some other authority reaches a determination about the character or the quality of this or that.

I say that the power of determination is in our hearts and minds and hands. That power lies with each of us as we define and redefine the limits of our thought. What are the shared values and beliefs that will be the boundaries of our lives? What will we determine is sensible or not? We have the power to define war and peace. We have the power to determine that war is a stupid and useless deeply immoral and unjust enterprise. We have the power to define war as insanity. We have the power to determine that it is obsolete to bring about any good result. We have the power to determine that it is beyond the pale of reasonable human action.

We have the power to define and to redefine what we expect from our government regarding its responsibilities to all of its citizens, especially to the poor. We have the power to

make the poor a national priority. This is the criterion upon which nations will be judged. We have the power to determine that we will no longer tolerate the wealth of a nation going into the abyss of the military/industrial complex, but rather we want our tax dollars going to programs both at home and abroad that will bring about life and not facilitate death. We have the power to make this determination.

And, when King calls us to a greater determination, he is calling us to a larger, smarter, more skilled, more enthusiastic, more noble, more virtuous, more excellent determination. Our goals should be greater, our resolve more resolute, our acting more magnanimous. He is calling us to act as if we were children of the Divine. To love as God loves, to love justice and mercy and to understand our own limitations in relations to the limitlessness of God. Yet, at the same time, to trust that we can do more than we think we can do; we can forgive what we do not think we can forgive; we can go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, share out of our own need, set aside our own greed; become vulnerable; love the unlovable because the limitless God lives inside of us through Holy Spirit.

Toward the end of his final sermon, King tells the story of the time he was stabbed at a book signing. The tip of the blade was very near his aorta. Had he sneezed he would have died. He told his audience of a letter he received from a white high school girl that said simply that she was glad that he did not sneeze. He said that he too was glad that he did not sneeze lest he would not have seen the success of the civil rights movement in “standing up for the best in the American dream” this brings him to the famous end of this sermon, the part with which we are so very familiar. He said:

Well, I don't know that will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's 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. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. (286)

The promised land is ours to determine. It is ours to imagine and then to work to bring into reality. The glory of the coming of the Lord is us. You are the second coming and I am the second coming when we live the complete, perfect, radical love of God that loves even our enemies, that dares to overcome evil with good, that loves a love that is so profound that there is no room for fear.

King's last line comes from the first line of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." It is a war song. Since war is obsolete, much of the sentiment in this song is obsolete. However. The last line with a slight modification fits into a new and greater determination.

"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me. As he died to make us holy, let us die -- substitute live -- that all be free while God is marching on. Glory glory hallelujah. Glory glory hallelujah. Glory, glory hallelujah His truth is marching on."

Works Cited

King, Martin Luther. "I See the Promised Land." A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr. Ed. James Melvin Washington. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.