

Text: [John 8:31-32 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: January 11, 2026
Title: “Truth: Why We Can’t Wait” – What Dr. King Still Asks of Us, Wk 1
Theme: Truth challenges us to respond with action.

Introduction

So this series is a long time coming
Recently I have been thinking more and more deeply about a few
topics that are critical to our Christian moral perspective
Truth, peace, and justice

Which only makes sense, when we see justice being trampled in
our streets
When we have people begging to be handed peace prizes while
simultaneously starting wars
And when we have the history of events all of us lived through
actively being rewritten

So more and more, I have been reading the work of theologians
who likewise lived through moments of crisis
Among them - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who lived
and served during Hitler’s rise to power

And, of course, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Now, I am no scholar of King – I want to make that clear
I don’t claim any specific expertise beyond the types of reading
and research that lie behind any of my other sermon series
But my goal in this month as we honor Dr. King’s birthday is to
bring some of his work into conversation with the scriptures
and the present moment
With an emphasis on how his words are still relevant to us now,
still a call to action for us today

The reason I want to emphasize action is this:
In a predominantly white church,
when we go no further than talking about a King's "dream" – it
kind of leaves us off the hook
Because, of course, a dream is not real
It motivates hope, but not necessarily action
No dream is ever realized unless and until we take steps to make
it so

And so that's why I want us to reflect on Dr. King
And ask ourselves what he might still be asking of us now

<Prayer>

1

I was thinking about truth in terms of a fire alarm
Now, if the fire alarm were to go off in here right now
And we did nothing
We stayed in our seats and I kept preaching
That would be equivalent to us saying:
"Oh, it's malfunctioning.
It's a false alarm – nothing to be worried about"

Because if it *were* true, would it not demand a response from us?
Would we not have to *do* something?

We often think about truth in very intellectual terms
All in our heads

And that's why we're so vulnerable today
To the idea that there is *no objective reality*
Only points of view and reactions
You have yours, and *I* have mine

So we all can look at those cellphone videos of a woman being
shot in her car in Minneapolis
And it becomes a Rorschach test for our general political leanings
Just like everything else

But truth has a much more expansive claim on us than our
political leanings
It requires something of us

When you hear the fire alarm, are you going to respond?

2

Throughout the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr.
in his role as President of the Southern Christian Leadership
Conference
Was in Birmingham, Alabama to work with other local
organizations on what he called a “direct action” campaign
Demonstrations and boycotts designed to exert pressure on the
white political leadership in Birmingham to come to the table
To negotiate improvements in conditions for the African American
population of the city

It was in the course of those demonstrations that Dr. King was
arrested
And it was those same demonstrations which prompted a formal
response by a number of prominent white clergymen
Including two Methodist bishops – in a full page ad in a
Montgomery newspaper
The text of that ad said, in part: “We recognize the natural
impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in
being realized. But we are convinced that these
demonstrations are *unwise* and *untimely*.”¹

Dr. King responded in what became one of the most iconic writings of the Civil Rights era – his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

One of those bishops I mentioned, in his 1983 autobiography, described King’s Letter as a “propaganda move”²
I would describe it as truth-telling

In it Dr. King makes very clear – in a section you probably have heard before – why as an “outsider,” he’s there:

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice *anywhere* is a threat to justice *everywhere*. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”³

Then he goes on to tell the truth about those injustices:

“There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation.”⁴

He speaks not only of the *violence* and *fear* stoked by racial hate
– of lynchings and police dogs turned on demonstrators
But also the more mundane, daily insults of life: racial epithets,
segregated lunch counters, humiliating signs,
Being forced to sleep in your car because motels were closed to
you

And the psychological impact of having to tell your child:

“That amusement park you saw advertised on the TV? Honey, no, I’m sorry, that’s not for us.”⁵

He also describes, in no uncertain terms, his profound disappointment with white Christians, including white churches and clergy

Words I return to when I need to find courage to speak truth more boldly:

I must confess that over the past few years I have been *gravely disappointed* with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not...the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a *negative* peace which is the absence of tension to a *positive* peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you and the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for "a more convenient season."⁶

His words sound familiar, right down to this day, 60 years later
Truth ignored, truth not acted upon, is truth denied
It's no different than staying in your seat when the fire alarm starts going off

3

Our scripture lesson is mercifully brief today
But also familiar
I'd list it as one of the essential teachings of Jesus:
"The truth shall set you free"

We all know this to be true – experientially:
Lies tend to box us in
They limit our freedom

That's the premise of every sitcom where, on the first date, the
guy lies to the girl about something important
And then spends the rest of the episode contorting himself to
keep up the charade
Take even the simple case - if you ever called into work sick when
you weren't, *really*
You aren't free to post a photo of you and your family down the
Shore, are you?

The lies we tell create the boxes we live in
Personal, political, and otherwise

But the truth has the power to tear down walls, break us out of our
boxes, and redefine the space we live in
And what Dr. King did in his letter was to tear down those walls
Both about the actual injustices African Americans faced
AND the complicity of white people, including the white church, in
those injustices

Though it might cause us some embarrassment, even shame,
It's worth remembering that Alabama Gov. George Wallace –
who delivered the infamous line “segregation now, segregation
tomorrow, segregation forever” in his inaugural address,
and who employed a member of the KKK as his speechwriter –
was a proud Methodist⁷

3A

So it's not hard to see why, alongside Jesus' words
There's a second saying we all have probably heard:
“Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable.”

Breaking out of the old boxes our lies have created is hard work
Uncomfortable work, difficult work

So difficult, in fact, that we will do just about anything we can to
avoid it

We will put it off as long as we can

For example, by banning the teaching of “Letter from a
Birmingham Jail” in schools and DEI in hiring practices

But let’s come back to John’s gospel

To hear the rest of the quotation from scripture:

“You are truly my disciples IF you remain FAITHFUL to my
teaching.

THEN you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

The key phrase is this: IF YOU REMAIN FAITHFUL

That’s the lesson

Truth is not about KNOWING

It’s about DOING

Not: “Do you believe it?”

But: “Will you live it?”

4

Because the same white clergymen who called Dr. King’s actions
“unwise and untimely” also affirmed this noble-sounding
truth:

“No person’s freedom is safe unless every person’s freedom is
equally protected.”

Which, to my ears, sounds a little like: “A threat to justice
anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”⁸

They LITERALLY wrote that in another statement they issued
earlier – in January 1963
And YET, when it came time for Dr. King and the Black population
of Birmingham to act on that truth,
these same white bishops said: “Wait.” Why?

Because they failed to understand something basic – and
scriptural – about the nature of Christian truth
It’s not fundamentally about KNOWING, but about DOING

Truth is not a thing to be believed
But a life to be lived

5

So my question today is this:
Do we hear the fire alarm?
And are we going to do something about it?
Or are we going to keep pretending like it’s not blaring all around
us?

If we don’t want to live in a society where people are left to bleed
out on the street
Then we’ve got to stand for compassion

If we don’t want to live in a society where law has become lawless
Then we’ve got to stand for justice

If you don’t want to live in a world torn apart by conflict
Then we’ve got to stand for peace

Now is a time for living the truth of what we believe
Truth isn't about believing and knowing
It's about living and doing

We can't wait

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.gracepresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Letter-from-Birmingham-Jail.pdf>, p.1.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nolan_Bailey_Harmon

³ <https://www.gracepresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Letter-from-Birmingham-Jail.pdf>, p.3

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p.5.

⁶ Ibid., p.7

⁷ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/wallace-george-wallace-and-his-circle/#:~:text=Asa%20Carter,group%20shared%20his%20volatile%20temperament.>

See also

⁸ Ibid, p.1.