

Today on Martin Luther King weekend, I want to begin by telling you a little about another American hero – Dorothy Day. Dorothy Day was the founder of the Catholic worker movement. Like King in his day, Dorothy Day was controversial for her time in the 1930s. She spoke out against war and the oppression of the poor. But she did way more than just speak out. She lived it. At any given time, she opened her home to homeless people, she fed the hungry, she reached out to everyone she could who was in need. You might disagree with some of her stances, but no one could doubt that she practiced what she preached. As with many people who truly live out their faith, toward the end of her life, society began to see Day less as a controversial activist and more as an example of what it means to live out the Christian faith. Reflecting on this transformation of being someone who was largely criticized for her activist positions into someone mostly admired, Day said, “Please don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed so easily.”

Let me say that again, “Please don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed so easily.”

Her point was that usually when we turn someone into a saint who we universally admire, we choose to remember only the parts of their life and their message that don’t challenge us or make us uncomfortable.

I think about that quote every year on Martin Luther King weekend because I feel like, if we’re not careful, we can do that to him. Now, let me be clear what I’m saying. I am not saying we should not find comfort and joy this weekend. I’m not saying we shouldn’t deeply admire and be inspired by people like Dr. King. We absolutely should be. But what I am saying is that if we spend this weekend only talking about how far we’ve come, if we spend this weekend only celebrating what Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement accomplished without also spending some time thinking about how far we have to go, then, in a way, we have dismissed him. My hope is that this weekend, we will all be inspired by Dr. King’s legacy, but I also hope that we will spend at least a little bit of this weekend being willing to be challenged and be made uncomfortable.

And I think one essential part of Dr. King’s message where, I at least, remain uncomfortable is about justice for the poor. Dr. King once preached a sermon on our Scripture today – the Good Samaritan. A religious scholar asked Jesus a question about what commandment is the most important. He and Jesus agreed that it’s to love God and to love one’s neighbor as we love ourselves. Then the scholar wanted to probe a bit further and asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” And to that question, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

In the story, a man is travelling down a dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. There were caves all along the road side, the perfect place for bandits to hide out and wait on their victims. And that’s what happened. The man was robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite passed by without stopping to help. Finally, a Samaritan, an enemy of the man, stopped, bandaged the man’s wounds, carried him to an inn, and paid for his stay. Jesus’ point is that it was the Samaritan, the one considered an outcast, who was the true neighbor to the man.

In his sermon, King points out that many have speculated as to why the priest or Levite didn't stop to help. Maybe they were too busy. Maybe they didn't want to touch what they thought could be a dead body and become ceremonially unclean. Maybe they were scared because the road is dangerous and they didn't want to linger too long in one place lest they too would be attacked. We don't really know. But King wants us to flip the question on its head. He believes that the difference in the priest and Levite verses the Samaritan is in what question they asked. King wonders if the priest and Levite were asking, "What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?" In contrast, he wonders if the Samaritan asked, "What will happen to this man if I don't stop?"

Tomorrow, we along with millions of people all across the country will participate in service projects. Congregations and community groups throughout Milton will be making "blessing bags" to share with those who are homeless throughout Greater Boston. It's one way we answer King's question, "What will happen to this man if I don't stop?" What will happen to people in need if we don't serve?

It's a good question and an important question. It's a question that should remind all of us that we are called to serve others, called to share of what we have with those in need. But that's only part of the message. You see, King preached this sermon on the Good Samaritan as part of the last speech he ever gave before he was assassinated when he was in Memphis, Tennessee to support the sanitation workers strike.

Let me read this excerpt from his sermon:

That's the question before you tonight. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" That's the question. 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.

Notice that King was not talking about just helping an individual person with charity. He was talking about justice. He was talking about a labor movement for better wages and better working conditions.

You see friends, to truly honor Dr. King, we are called to do works of charity and service, but we are also called to move beyond those works to address the systemic causes of racism and poverty. To fail to do so is to dismiss the man we're trying to honor.

But that's hard, right?

There's nothing controversial about serving others, not really. There's nothing controversial about making blessing bags for homeless people, not really. But there is something controversial about participating in a labor strike, or protesting, or marching. That was true in King's day and it's still true in our day.

And I think one of the problems we have is that it's so much easier to think of the humanity of people we're serving. You know, when we make those blessing bags tomorrow, I will imagine the human being that will receive them. But when we're talking about systemic issues – like access to health care, or a living wage, or safe working conditions, or affordable housing, it's easy to think of those as political issues – sort of abstract, right. But what's so important to remember is that all of those "issues" are real life people.

So to make that point, I want to end by telling you about one of my heroes – a woman named Bridgette Dorsey. For my first job as a pastor, I was tasked with starting a new church in the poorest neighborhood in the state of Alabama. For a number of years, there was a non-profit social service agency that had a soup kitchen, helped low income seniors pay utility bills, and an after school tutoring program. My job was to start a worshipping congregation there and Bridgette was one of the first people who joined the church. I met her because she worked in the after school program and soon I learned her story.

Bridgette has a special needs daughter, Clarissa. When Clarissa was born, Bridgette was married to a man who had been physically abusing her for years. After the birth of her daughter, she decided that she wasn't going to let her daughter grow up in a dangerous home, so she found the strength to leave. She and Clarissa moved into the YWCA shelter for victims of domestic abuse. While there, Bridgette took some job readiness classes. Now Bridgette has a learning disability. Reading is very difficult for her. But she learned sign language. And soon she got a job as a teacher's aid working with hearing impaired students at a local elementary school. Around the same time, she and Clarissa got their own apartment and moved out of the YWCA shelter. But it wasn't the best neighborhood. There was a lot of crime and again, Bridgette wanted to make sure that her daughter not only grew up in a home that was safe but in a community that was safe.

So in addition to her full time teacher's aid job, she started working in the after school program. And then on weekends, she took a job cleaning the bathroom at a football venue that hosted various sporting events each week. She finally saved up enough money for a down payment to buy her own house. It was run down, needed a lot of work, but it was hers and several church groups helped her fix it up as best they could.

Oh, one more thing. While all of this was going on, Bridgette was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to have surgery and chemo.

I met Bridgette in 2006. She had been living in that house since 2001. She still lives there today – 22 years later. Clarissa is grown now. In all my life, I have never met someone who has overcome so much as Bridgette Dorsey.

She's a survivor of domestic violence, of homelessness, and of cancer.

She overcame a learning disability.

She worked three jobs at once to be able to afford her own house.

She's a single mother of a special needs daughter.

Bridgette Dorsey is one of the most amazing people I've ever known.

Now here's the thing – I've told Bridgette's story dozens of times to who knows how many churches or small groups. I've told it because I believe you can't help but be inspired by someone as strong and resilient as Bridgette is. But here's what I've also come to realize:

It should never have been that hard.

No one should have to work 3 jobs to be able to own a house.

In spite of all the help Bridgette received from the YWCA, from the church groups that renovated her house, from the job training program that taught her sign language, it still should not have been that hard.

You see all those things – the YWCA, the job readiness program, the volunteers fixing her home – are really good things. We should be involved in ministries and programs like that. But if that's what it takes for a victim of domestic violence living in poverty to make it out, not a whole lot of people are ever going to make it. There's not many people who are as special as Bridgette Dorsey. I know I'm not.

You see friends, the problem when we limit the work of our faith to works of charity and service is that we might get some amazing stories about people like Bridgette Dorsey, but we'll also leave a whole lot of people on the side of the road. I'll end by giving Dr. King the last word, ““We are still called upon to give aid to the beggar who finds himself in misery and agony on life's highway. But one day, we must ask the question of whether an edifice which produces beggars must not be restructured and refurbished.”