

Those were the words of the Rev William J Barber II from North Carolina, the leader of the New Poor People's March that is continuing to spread the word of standing up against the triune evils that Dr King names so many years ago. Many of us in this room have attended Poor People's March events – and the time Karen and I got arrested in 2016, it was at one of their actions.

There is so much to do – and so little time to do it. Dr Barber likes to start his speeches by asking folks to say “Forward together” – now you say it – “forward together”

Now - “not one step back.” You – “forward together – not one step back!” Repeat...

It is a hard thing to say today in 2020 – when we have seen so many things rolled back these past 4 years. So many environmental gains; so many humanitarian gains, so many economic gains, so many just plain human decency gains. All in the name of undoing the legacy left by President Obama.

But – as any of us who have been around a while – or who have studied history know – society swings on a pendulum. Often it feels like two steps forward and one step back – or even two or three steps back during really bad periods. But you know what – it doesn't mean we ever stop. And that we know we have to keep moving forward together – because only together, united with other people who value truth and justice and decency and courage – has anything worthwhile ever gotten done.

This has been a big weekend for this little church. Yesterday a contingent of us braved the rain and slush and predicted winds and took our banners downtown Chicago to march in for some of us – our third Women's March. I tell you right now I didn't want to go. Looked out my window at that rain and slush and just thought “hell no.”

But as luck would have it, I was reading my Martin Luther King autobiography. Reading about people being threatened and bullied, being hit with water hoses and dogs, having their houses bombed and children mauled. A little slush sure looks a lot less threatening at that point. Our other members who made it out were following the dictates of their conscience; remembering that every single person matters. That what we do, even when it's hard, even when no one might notice, matters.

Mother nature smiled upon us because it really wasn't that bad. The rain stopped and the temperature held in the mid 30's and the wind didn't pick up until we were on our way home on the train. So that was one event. Tomorrow we have our annual CRS *Faith in Action Assembly* honoring Dr King downtown. There's still time for you to sign on if you feel inspired. It's a way of showing support for the Community Renewal Society, a community organizing group that has been working for over a century, mostly led by people of color, to work for justice in our area. It's a way for our mostly white, mostly middle class church to partner with people who live a vastly different experience of life and learn and grow and share and bear witness. We bring our privilege to work for our fellow humans. It's not a huge thing – but it's something.

We do it because we remember that despite all our differences, we are all part of an interconnected web of life. We do it to give back to a life that has been generous with us. We do it to affirm our own

humanity and commitment to equality and justice. We go because of the people who have inspired us by leading lives of meaning and purpose – lives devoted to the service of others. Just like I got myself out to that march by the inspiring life of the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr King was an amazing and inspiring man. He lived a big life – filled with very big words. But he didn't begin that way. He began as child who loved to play – and was hurt when his best friend quit playing with him after they began going to separate schools and realized that they were different races.

He began as a student that loved studying ideas and learning about how the world worked – and realizing that the system into which he'd been born was profoundly unjust. In his autobiography, Dr King tells a story of going with his father into a store to buy shoes. They sat in the empty store in the chairs at the front of the store but the clerk told them they had to move to the back of the store before he would serve them. His father, the first Rev Martin Luther King, refused to move and said if they could be served where they were they would find shoes elsewhere – and when the clerk still refused to serve them, left infuriated.

He tells of traveling home on a bus when a huge influx of white people came onto the bus and forced them out of their seats, forcing them to stand in the aisles all night long and how he seethed at the injustice but obeyed his elderly traveling companion and kept his silence – storing up his anger and hurt and betrayal of his country. All of these experience served to help form a man who understood the deep injustices of his country, but still loved it enough to offer his life in service to helping heal and repair its flaws.

I've been studying Dr King for many years now but really enjoyed reading this autobiography because it helped me see the man behind the towering legend. Dr King didn't set out to lead a movement. He set out to follow his father's footsteps and become a minister. Now he wanted to be a really good minister – and studied and practiced with an intensity that put my own studying to shame – but he wanted to serve. He wanted to be a servant of God and people. His love and courage led him to say yes time and time again when fate called him away from the path of quiet preacher, husband and father. Times when he made plan in one direction, like when he was called to serve the church in Montgomery, and then was suddenly plunged into the middle of the bus boycott and made president of the board that managed the action.

We remember him as a man of courage and conviction – a bigger than life individual who died for the cause of justice – but I also found a very human man. A man who faltered and prayed. Who was just trying a way to provide for his family. A man who didn't feel he was enough. After he'd been arrested in Montgomery and became the lead figure in the ongoing action, he began receiving as many as 40 threats a day. He wrote:

As the weeks passed, I began to see that many of the threats were in earnest. Soon I felt myself faltering and growing in fear. One day, a white friend told me that he had heard from reliable sources that plans were being made to take my life. For the first time I realized that something could happen to me... It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had

reached the saturation point. I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. I had heard these things before, but for some reason that night it got to me. I turned over and I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't sleep. I was frustrated, bewildered, and then I got up... With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory: "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. ... I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."ⁱ

In that dark hour he felt the power of something larger than himself, something he named God, assure him that he wasn't alone – and that he would be supported in going forward to the life that was calling him.

This is the Martin that speaks to me. The one electrifying a million people on the National Mall is inspiring, but this one, this tired worn down and fearful man reaches through the decades and connects with my heart. He didn't set out to be the leader of a movement. He set out to serve – and then said yes each time the moment asked him to continue moving forward. He looked at the present moment – in what was needed and what he had to offer – and his saying yes changed the world. This is why we remember him each third Monday in January. It's why this is the one National Holiday which wasn't designed as a day off so much as a day on.

I have a video to share with you from this year's Day of Service website:

[Video](#)

Ruby Bridges, the activist who was that little girl in 1960 who went to school in New Orleans. She talked about her teacher, Barbara Henry, a

“white Boston native who was the only teacher willing to accept Ruby. All year, she was a class of one. Ruby ate lunch alone and sometimes played with her teacher at recess, but she never missed a day of school that year.”ⁱⁱ

Barbara Henry also accepted the call in front of her. She said yes to teaching an innocent child, a victim of the extreme prejudice and racism present in Louisiana at that time, and her yes made all the difference to Ruby. Stories like those of Dr King are huge and inspiring – Martin had some very big words – but sometimes they can leave us feeling inadequate in comparison. Thankfully, not all of us are called to larger than life lives. But that doesn't mean that our lives, our choices, our 'yeses' don't matter.

We don't have to go out chasing glory – or trying to get crowds to follow us. All we have to do, is to be present to what is right in front of us, in this particular moment and this particular place. What is the need that we can answer? What is the action that needs doing? The piece of work that is within the scope of our talents? What can you offer the work of your hands?

As you may have guessed – there are always things going on around this church where you can be involved. Big things, little things, things that climb on rocks... And lucky for you, next week your

current leaders are offering a Leap into Leadership dinner and presentation so that you can find out where you might fit and what place your time and talent might fill. Even if you feel that your life is way too busy right this minute, please join us in learning the path to leadership – to service in our community and in the larger world. There are jobs as small as stuffing envelopes and as large as serving the National association. There are ways to get involved in working on projects like homelessness and mental illness – and ways to push back against the intransigent racism in our society.

Not all of us can be a Dr King, as brilliant and courageous and self-sacrificing as he was. But each of us can serve – can offer our hearts and hands to something much bigger than our own small selves. And when we do, paradoxically, we find out that we gain so much more than we ever give away.

We live in a world that desperately needs truth and justice, courage and decency. Will you stand with me – in spirit – and again pledge to continue moving toward a better future?

Forward together... not one step back.

Forward together... not one step back.

Forward together... not one step back.

Blessed be and amen.

ⁱ Carson, Clayborne. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 76). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruby-bridges?gclid=Cj0KCQiA9orxBRD0ARIsAK9JDxQpbkc7V575n0PBxUXwdYwOKg_cUDMePWmDDJ1OZaZ8Nxp8mleSlSqaAgC_EALw_wcB