

ENCOUNTERING MARTIN LUTHER THE GERMAN, AND MARTIN LUTHER KING
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This sermon starts with the simple impetus that I just thought it was cool that Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, not only two wildly famous people, but two important reformers, shared a sorta unique name. It was a gimmick for a sermon. That's what today is about.

I have not ever heard what is an obvious connection explored very much. Have you? I mean, King's dad was named after the Luther after all.

Ok, it is a shoddy premise for a sermon, I'll admit it. Martin Luther King does not serendipitously share the name of essentially the first Protestant leader. He was named for him, after him, by his Dad after a trip to Germany. Martin Luther King was for the first half of his boyhood Mike King. I am not sure that makes the story better or worse. What I do know is that there are a few parallels.

Both Martin Luthers were raised by strong fathers with ambitious aims for them.

Both challenged that the rules, codes, and laws of their day be held subject to a higher moral law.

Both were the most important articulators of a movement, a call for a larger liberty that needed a respectable articulator.

Both protested the entrenched convenience of the powerful, and like all such good deeds, were both beloved, remembered and hunted for their efforts.

Both men were dismissed in their day as behind a cause that would eventually pass, blow over.

And ironically both, having been at the crest of the wave of change had to face critiques by more radical forces, within their own ranks and beyond, that they had not gone far enough.

They were both Christians. Protestants, and Clergy.

Both attained the highest degrees awarded of their time;

Both engaged in the religious and racial debates of their day, and had to navigate their own burning ideals and drives in real time with entrenched powerful political and religious institutions.

They both leave behind movements, and a few mythic moments that are now etched into humanities historical consciousness—King perhaps most famously for his "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech, and assassination in Memphis, and Luther for nailing his list of ninety-five complaints on the front door of a church.

Both liberated the consciousness of their time. The German Luther incited for nearly half of Europe a *religious revolution that replaced the power of Church as an authority with the power of God's Grace*. And the King stretched the consciousness of many in our nation to broaden the promise of liberty to all, and smartly exposed the worst of old boy southern racism.

How's that for a similar legacy of a similar name.

Both the German and the King were lucky that their time corresponded with a new technology. And both were savvy in employing it. King knowingly used TV's capacity to put the uncomfortable visuals of water hoses and angry dogs turned on innocents to his advantage. King knew that respectable citizens like Rosa Parks in handcuffs would press uncomfortably on the psyche of White America.

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Had King not preceded and defined his era more than Malcom X did we may still have Jim Crow laws in place.

In Luther's case, had his passion of reforming the churches vilest indiscretions not corresponded perfectly with the invention of the printing press, and had not one of the first major printing presses of the day been figuratively down the street from his home, his 1517, ninety-five theses or complaints may not have been broadly distributed throughout Europe with enough speed to essentially build enough popular support to protect him from being easily killed.

Luther the German (1483 - 1546)

Most of us probably know more about the "King" Martin Luther than the German one, so here is a summary of what the German born Luther born in 1483 did with the sixty- three years afforded him. Get ready, he is much more interesting than you think Lutheran worship is.

The young Luther, known by his childhood friends as "the philosopher," diverged from his family path as a law school student to become a monk, and a professor. He, not his handlers, not his scribes, **he** translated the Bible from Latin into his native German tongue, and in doing so set new standards for the rules and processes of translation. He was responsible for bringing the very words of the Bible into the vernacular of his people, and in doing this he furthered the development of a singular German language.

Luther wrote hymns and was by doing so largely responsible for returning singing to church. Luther returned the right of clergy to marry. The norms we have come to accept in this church are in large part attributable to Luther.

He has an entire Protestant tradition for which (As "wikipedia" counts it) today, nearly seventy million Christians are defined, and there are some other three hundred and thirty million other Protestant Christians that can trace their history back to Luther's reforming work splitting off from the Catholic church. Our Unitarian tradition could be counted among them.

He is famous for a few main ideas: people could win salvation only by faith; all church teachings should be based on the Bible (meaning that the Pope and all the Catholic church traditions were false authorities); and that all people of faith were free to interpret the Bible.

Luther is perhaps the western world's greatest voice ensuring that we not make idols and gods of religious leaders and institutions. And by that I largely mean that theologically Luther's Reformation taught that salvation was not within the control of the Church, or clergy, but found through an unmediated gift of God's grace.

Given humans' capacity to seek peace and, in Luther's words salvation, in rituals, and leaders, and institutions, this is always a necessary thing to say. Luther knew that power leads to corruption. Luther took a big powerful cleaning swipe at the indulgence and pockets of power and complacency that builds up over time in any institution.

He, like Jesus, before him symbolically did a bit of this. (I take off my robes and throw them away.) Luther provided a firm clear rejection that church practices and doctrine were not only invalid biblically but in fact violated the scriptures.

Listening to Martin's story I realized just how much of a Protestant I really am.

Not unlike our own Emerson three hundred years later, Luther instructed the church to get out of the way of people's spiritual lives. But Luther the German's story is not so perfect. And the first part is not a slight as much as it is sympathy.

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See, for all Luther's accomplishments and push that it is all about faith, for all the liberty he brought, ironically, despite instituting a theology that offered a more direct connection to God, he never seemed to lift above his own sense of being sinful.

Luther could have, in my eyes, used a little bit of our modern caution about guilt.

Luther personally was pensive, sorrowful, and either from it or with it had serious heart and digestive issues. To make matters worse he had the embarrassment of having a lot of his philosophies attributed to the large amount of time he spent constipated, and rumor has it some of his greatest moments of theological liberation corresponded to his greatest moments . . . well . . . let's say of digestive liberation.

That's funny, and I only share it because he deserves a little comeuppance. Because, well, see, ironically the Martin Luther that would become the namesake for the most important racial integrator of the Twentieth Century was an irrefutable anti-Semite and political oppressor.

It is disappointing. The man so courageous in the face of a powerful church, Luther knowingly advocating the systematic and intentional disempowerment of Jews in his age, and unknowingly, but also not innocently provided a good deal of the literary and cultural antisemitic fuel that would four centuries later become the Holocaust.

Moreover, in his own age, in part wanting to secure the support of the German princes that he politically needed, he encouraged the nobility to visit swift and bloody punishment upon the peasants during their not insignificant War.

It may simply be that I am at least technically a contemporary of MLK, but to me Martin Luther King transcended himself it seems in a way that the original Luther did not. Different between the two Martin Luthers is how broad the call for justice be. For Luther, the work of justice was reserved to the heavenly realm.

To me, Luther, who I think smart and brave, was in a way too religious, too loyal to his Christian faith, too authoritarian to get that there is no wisdom greater than compassion. Where King was capable not only of acting out of compassion, but wielding it as a weapon against those that held it.

It is hard to know where King would have gone had he lived longer. It seems that his patience that real change would be perhaps more difficult than his Gandhi instincts would have allowed for, towards the end of his life.

Luther the Jr. 1929-68

Now gone to us a little more than a generation ago, Martin Luther King, to my and most accounts, truly is ". . . the most revered and important African American to ever have lived."

The outlines of the Jr. Luther's story are learned rather than lived, for having been born fourteen months before he was killed, the memory loops in my brain were far from being turned on yet when he was killed in the summer of '68.

From my estimation, more than any other voice, MLK is for me the person most responsible for getting white America to take another step to live up to the long-betrayed promise that all Americans are created equal.

When I was twenty, in the fall of my senior year in college having returned from a Habitat for Humanity worksite I helped organize students to work on, I found myself in the shower and frothy haired, and will

never forget thinking, if I accomplish all that MLK did would I think I had done enough, and I shrugged a touch that I suppose I would have to.

What hubris.

He was, as we likely know, a southern PK—Preacher's kid—and walked through the steps awarded the at least moderately privileged. He attended college, graduate school, and he got a Doctorate at the same Boston University Divinity School where I got my Master's in Divinity.

There can be no justice for anyone unless there's justice for everyone. King seems to speak to us about the interdependence of all people and things. Martin said, "Peace was not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice."

Say it with me, just because no truer thing is there, and no harder more contrary thing is there to know—"Peace was not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice." Now, it is a message that needs to be forever repeated in a prosperous land.

For King, any peace that is purchased on the absence of any necessary suppressed conflict or crisis or tension is really a lie. King figured out that non-violent direct action could reveal to people that the suffering of African Americans is the suffering of all Americans. A student of Gandhi, King knew that for justice to prevail there needs to be tension and a bit of un-comfortableness, in order to direct the oppressors to negotiation and resolution.

King teaches me that it will always better to focus morally on what you do and who you are, than what your rival, oppressor, is doing. Good advice for everyone, everywhere.

To me, the legacy his work and life has left behind tells us, in a way nobody since has, that you can be a part of remarkable historic mythic things in the modern world in your time. For me, and for so many, he is the modern patron saint of the combination of composure, politeness, and dogged persistence all good works and activism require.

In the same way that the German Luther was frustrated by what had come to be the accepted practices of the Catholic Church in his age, King meant that the things most Americans at that time and place accepted as "normal" were in fact pretty immoral institutions and practices harmful to real life people.

Both of these reformers knew sociologically the truth we most concretely attribute to physics. The truth that objects at rest will most likely remain at rest, and that objects in motion only stop when met with resistance. They knew that one of the most powerful forces in the world is, oddly enough, the power of inertia.

Both Martin Luthers had to fight the truth that some things have been around so long that everyone accepts it. That over time things lose their wrongness and require a spark to the deep-seated feeling that we need to agitate for change.

They must have both heard endlessly "Let sleeping dogs lie," "Keep your mouth shut," "Don't make waves" "Don't rock the boat." But both men drove themselves to a place where they could not accept it anymore.

When you get to the level of engagement of these two in your passion, what designer you wear, where you rest your head, and in the end whether you live more years or not, becomes secondary.

So, this sermon obviously begs for all of us to ask ourselves, "Am I in motion, and if so, in which direction, and towards what." The people who are so driven to fight for the justice that is so obviously in need or doing, have since my late teens always been my heroes.

For all my adoration, behind it is a bit of frustration. See, I can write at least a little bit in the same fiery way he does. That certainly is overstating it, but I know when I hear in the cadence in my speech that I can cultivate some of the prophetic rage both possess, I don't really think it is that hard.

What is hard is writing that way, knowing the gnawing truth that your own passions and commitments are so much more diluted than these two were. It is hard to know that my focus, my commitment, and my courage is so much more diluted than theirs is.

I care about injustice the hungry, global warming, human trafficking, you know that list is long, but I also care about how much comfort that is going cost me, and what the proper amount of my seemingly limited love I want to share with the world.

The German and the Jr. are an inspirations and thorny frustrations

Famous as they are, these two remind me that it is not easy or even fun, to shake up the status quo you stand in and could benefit from. Their hard lesson is that conflict, attention, and difficult feelings are inevitable in shaking up the status quo at the core of injustice. However, both of these men teach us that there are times when confrontation and conflict are needed.

For King, when conflict was morally justified, and even morally necessary, he called conflict "The Sword that Heals."

Sometimes it is just necessary and worthy to be obsessed about something.

When you act as a person in your age as an agent of change who can't sit idly by and acts to bring about the end of an established wrong, you act in step with Martin Luther plural

If in the Native American and Shamanic tradition of naming people by their characters, surely Martin Luther could among other things have come to symbolize one so obsessed with a righteous idea, so obsessed with the way it should be, that it takes over your life to define you.

May we be the people that lose sleep over worthy things. Things that matter, things that we, with others, acting out of our own sense of righteousness, can change.

AMEN