

PRAYING WITH MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

CALL TO PRAYER

Leader: Let us lay aside the cares of the day and connect with God's grace, which nourishes us to care for those in need.

We gather today to reflect on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., a man whose commitment to ridding the world of social sin resulted in discrimination, defamation of character, and ultimately his death. Dr. King is one of the most influential men of our times. His life and ministry continue to remind our nation and the world that the acts of injustice we confront daily require the faith-filled and faith-guided engagement of our heads, hearts, and hands.

“Thou, Dear God,” a collection of Dr. King’s prayers edited by Lewis Baldwin, provides a glimpse of King’s prayer life that often goes unnoticed. Prayer was the “sacred heart of his faith,” the foundation of his calling to serve as a prophetic social witness in an overall effort to free, humanize, and empower humanity. Dr. King “knew how to pray in all seasons of life.” From the pulpit to the kitchen table, he “laid his soul bare before God, praying for strength and guidance” during times of solidarity, aloneness, and adversity.



As we reflect on a few of Dr. King’s prayers, let us call to mind that, like generations of peacemakers who preceded him, he prayed with hope. His prayers affirm his faithfulness to black and oppressed cultures. He prayed with the hope that all oppressed people would be delivered from the Egypt of slavery and from the wilderness of segregation, and that they would one day reach the promised land of freedom, justice, human dignity, and equality of opportunity.

Reader 1: *The Higher Principle of Love* (A prayer recited after King’s address, “The Birth of a New Age,” at the 50th anniversary convention of the Alpha Phi Fraternity, Buffalo, New York, 1956.)

“God grant that the resources that you have will be used to do that, the great resources of education, the resources of wealth, and that we will be able to move into this new world, a world in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. A world in which men will throw down the sword and live by the higher principle of love. The time when we shall be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daylight of freedom and justice. That there will be the time we will be able to stand before the universe and say with joy—The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and our Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah!”

Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insight have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer?
- Does his message seem align with Catholic social thought? If so, in what ways?
- In the 21st century, what does it mean to “throw down the sword and live by the principle of love?”

Reader 2: *Forgive Us for What We Could Have Been but Failed to Be* (One of the prayers that King recited during his radio broadcasts from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, 1953.)

“O thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being. We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds, and we have not loved our neighbor as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive, we love our friends and hate our enemies, we go the first mile but dare not travel the second, we forgive but dare not to forget. And so as we look within ourselves we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against thee. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know thy will. Give us the courage to do thy will. Give us the devotion to love thy will. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.”



Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insight have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer?
- We are offered the opportunity to participate in God’s “intention” for the world. How well have we used or abused this opportunity?
- What is your understanding of social sin? Think of an example of social sin; what would it mean to go the extra mile?

Reader 3: *Help Us to Work with Renewed Vigor* (This prayer was delivered on September 6, 1953, as part of King’s broadcast from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.)

“Most gracious and all wise God, before whose face the generations rise and fall; Thou in whom we live, and move, and have our being. We thank thee (for) all of thy good and gracious gifts, for life and for health; for food and for raiment; for the beauties of nature and human nature. We come before thee painfully aware of our inadequacies and shortcomings. We realize that we stand surrounded with the mountains of love and we deliberately dwell in the valley of hate. We stand amid the forces of truth and deliberately lie. We are forever offered the high road and yet we choose to travel the low road. For these sins, O God, forgive. Break the spell of that which blinds our minds. Purify our hearts that we may see thee. O God in these turbulent days when fear and doubt are mounting high, give us broad visions, penetrating eyes, and power of endurance. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, for a better distribution of wealth and for a brotherhood that transcends race or color. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.”

Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insights have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer? Who, in today’s world exemplifies his message?
- When he speaks of the spell that blinds our minds, what is he referring to? What spells blind your mind?

PRAYER SERVICE

Reader 4: *A Great Nation: The Democratic National Convention* (King offered this prayer before giving testimony to the Platform and Resolutions Committee during six days of hearings at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois on August 11, 1956.)

“Oh God our gracious Heavenly Father we thank Thee for the privilege of assembling here this morning. We thank Thee for all the opportunities of life, and we stand together today and discuss vital matters confronting our nation and confronting our world. We ask Thy guidance be with us in all our deliberations and help us at all times to seek to do those things which are high, noble, and good, and to make our nation a great nation, a nation that follows all of the noble precepts of the Christian religion and all of the noble precepts of democracy. Grant, O God, that as we move on we will move toward that city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. Amen.”

Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insights have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer?
- What are the vital matters confronting our nation and the global community?
- What are the precepts of the Christian religion and democracy that he refers to?
- Do you play a role in making America a great nation that follows the precepts that both Dr. King and Jesus embodied? What is your role?

Reader 5: *I Can’t Face It Alone* (After receiving a telephone call from a white racist who threatened his life, his home, and his family, King said this prayer in the kitchen of his residence at 309 South Jackson Street in Montgomery, Alabama on January 28, 1956.)

“Lord, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they, too, will falter. 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.”

Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insight have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer?
- Think of a moment in your life when you could not find God—when you stood alone in fear. At that moment, did you call out to God? What did you do? In that despairing moment, were you able to find the outstretched?

Reader 6: *Help Me to See That I’m Just a Symbol of a Movement* (The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957.)

“O God, help me to see myself in my true perspective. Help me, O God, to see that I’m just a symbol of a movement. Help me to see that I’m the victim of what the Germans call a zeitgeist and that something was getting ready to happen in history. And that a boycott would have taken place in Montgomery, Alabama, if I had never come to Alabama. Help me to realize that I am—because of the forces of history and because of the fifty thousand Negroes of Alabama who will never get their names in the papers and in the headlines. O God, help me to see that where I stand today, I stand because others helped me to stand there and because the forces of history projected me there. And this moment would have come in history even if Martin Luther King had never been born.”

Pause for silent and/or shared reflection.

- What new insight have you gained from Dr. King’s prayer?
- Dr. King is quite clear that it is not a single leader who can bring about needed change. The leader can articulate the change that must come. Who are the leaders of today who call for systemic change that is consistent with the Gospels?
- What is the difference between direct action and social change? Why are both necessary for justice?



Center of
Concern

A LITANY OF CELEBRATION

Leader: Dr. King had a dream. The ideals of justice and freedom and the belief that all are created equal in the eyes of God are noble principles. But they are meaningless unless we embrace these ideals.

All: I will not keep silent. I will struggle with myself. I will not rest until the dream of justice and freedom becomes my personal dream. I must realize that I am not an innocent bystander. I can help bring about the dream by my action, or delay it by inaction.

Leader: Dr. King's dreamt of a day when people from all races and nations, even the offspring of slaves and former slave owners, can sit at a table as brothers and sisters and find ways of transforming their differences into the common good. That was Dr. King's dream. What is your dream?

All: My dream is that one day soon I will find a way to stop just celebrating the dream and start living it. It must become a part of my daily life or nothing much will change.

Leader: The dream is not about an ideal world. It is about the real world. Dr. King's poetic refrain, "I Have a Dream," is a call for us to remember the real world where injustice rules.

All: When I am in the shelter of my home, I must remember the homeless. When I eat, I must remember the hungry. When I feel secure, I must remember the insecure. When I see injustice, I must remember that it will not stop unless I stop it.

Leader: I have a dream!

All: I also have a dream. I have a dream that the Holy Spirit will arouse in me that very flame of righteousness that caused Dr. King to become a living sacrifice for the freedom and liberation of all of God's children. Then I will be able to resist racial injustice everywhere I see it, even within myself.

(Adapted from the United Presbyterian Church Prayer on Martin Luther King, Jr.)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: God of Hope, as we venture forth to be women and men of service,
Go before us as our Guide.

Renew us with the spirit of service and sacrificial love
Exemplified in the life of Dr. King.

May we be vessels of hope and justice in a world
Inundated with countless forms of violence and injustice.

May we never stand on the sidelines
As we witness injustice done upon our sisters and brothers,
But walk with eyes open to the needs of our communities,
With ears open to the needs of our world,
And with hands open in helpful service to our neighbors.

Then we will not only be blessed, but be a blessing to our world.
This is our prayer. Amen.



AN AFFIRMATION OF FAITH BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF DR. KING

I refuse to believe that we are unable to influence the events which surround us.

I refuse to believe that we are so bound to racism and war, that peace, brotherhood and sisterhood are not possible.

I believe there is an urgent need for people to overcome oppression and violence, without resorting to violence and oppression.

I believe that we need to discover a way to live together in peace, a way which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of this way is love.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. I believe that right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

I believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centered people have torn down, other-centered people can build up.

By the goodness of God at work within people, I believe that brokenness can be healed. "And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid."

(Adapted from the United Presbyterian Church
Prayer on Martin Luther King, Jr.)

FAITH IN ACTION

*"Life's most persistent
and urgent question is:
What are you doing for others?"*

~Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Each year, people of all ages, from countries around the world, pause to reflect on Dr. King's life and his challenge to stand with those whose dignity and basic human rights are being violated by institutions of greed and power. Let us emulate the lives of Jesus and Dr. King by stepping outside our comfort zones and work collectively to stand in solidarity with the vulnerable in our communities and world.

What can you do?

- Host discussions on Dr. King's life and principles of nonviolence and how these principles relate to:
- The wave of refugees and unaccompanied children and women seeking refuge
- The current escalation of violence in Sudan, Honduras, and Mexico.
- The root causes of poverty and ways to respond to the most vulnerable in your community.
- Send a letter to your member of Congress and ask them to support unaccompanied children at the border: <http://bit.ly/1mJtw9m>.

