



"Practicing or Pretending"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On January 14th, 2024, MLK Sunday from James 1 & 2*

With all the news about artificial intelligence today, it is easy to forget that we've been working with it for a long time. Remember Clippy the paperclip emoji from Microsoft Office who was always ready to offer assistance. Clippy would pop up at the bottom of the screen and say, "It looks like you're writing a letter. Would you like help?" Even if we didn't want help, Clippy was there. Well, old Clippy has popped up again in a meme going around the internet where Clippy says, "Hi! It looks like you've quoted Martin Luther King Jr. out of context instead of engaging with the complex reality of white supremacy in America. Would you like some help with that?"

Americans have become incredibly cavalier when it comes to quoting Dr. King. The peak of absurdity came during the Super Bowl in 2018, when Dodge ran an ad for tucks with a voice over of King's "Drum Major Instinct" speech. It was a desecration, and the irony is King had incredibly coarse words for advertisers who sell cars in that very speech which one savvy internet guru used to recut the ad with *those* excerpts instead, and I can attest the revised version is much more enjoyable. Last year, PagerDuty's chief executive took things to a new low when she quoted Dr. King in an email announcing layoffs at the company. She wrote, "I am reminded in moments like this, of something Martin Luther King said, 'the ultimate measure of a [leader] is not where [they] stand in the moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stand in times of challenge and controversy.'" Yikes.

Gratuitous, out of context, and "tone deaf" uses of Dr. King's words have become so frequent in society that Cornel West dubbed the phenomenon "The Santaclausification of Dr. King." When we memorialize a person, we tend to sanitize, sterilize, and sentimentalize their words. Or worse, we reduce their entire canon down to a single catchphrase or soundbite that is quoted out of context for the sake of supporting something King would have opposed. It's astonishing that King delivered over 2,500 public speeches and spoke nearly a million words, yet if you listen to politicians and pundits today, you'd think King only ever said one thing, "People should be judged not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character."



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Quoting that one line from King is lazy, but the real problem is the propensity of politicians and pundits to quote that line to support policies and perspectives King was clearly against. Several political leaders used that very line last year to claim that Dr. King would have been glad to see the Supreme Court overturn Affirmative Action. But King was the one who initiated the first, successful, affirmative action policy in the U.S. "Operation Breadbasket." He was well aware of arguments against affirmative action, which is why he wrote: "Whenever the issue of compensatory treatment for Black people is raised, some of our friends' recoil in horror. They agree Black people should be granted equality but believe they should ask nothing more. On the surface, this appears reasonable, but it's not realistic."

In '65, King compared affirmative action to the GI Bill which singlehandedly built the white middle class in America and said, "We have ample precedents for special compensatory programs, and a society that has done something special against Black people for hundreds of years must now do something special for Black people." King's support for Affirmative Action was clear and irrefutable. So why do people invoke his words to support banning books on slavery, forbidding curriculum on race, and ending affirmative action, when King spent his life adamantly working for all the things they're trying to eliminate?

It is not ignorance or coincidence. They're pretending and this act of pretense is part of a long and concerted effort to co-opt King's message for the cause of creating a colorblind racist society. Immediately prior to King's death, his popularity with Americans had decreased significantly because of his opposition to Vietnam and efforts to eradicate poverty. 72 percent of whites and 55 percent of blacks disapproved of him. So, in '73, when a bill was introduced to create a holiday commemorating Dr. King, it took ten years to get passed and when it did, 90 representatives and 22 senators voted against it. In fact, there are six lawmakers in congress today who opposed it, still holding elected office!

President Regan also opposed a national holiday, calling King a communist. And before signing the bill into law, he marked the first official MLK day by using King's words to oppose employment quotas designed to address racial discrimination even though King believed in quotas. Regan said, "We're committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a colorblind society that in the words of Dr. King, judges people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."



From that day a tradition was born of politicians and pundits engaging in pretense, using the same one line from Dr. King to support policies and projects King would have opposed and to oppose policies and projects that King would have supported. It is a disrespectful and disingenuous tradition that's been happening at an alarming rate and will certainly take place some this this weekend.

What are we to do when we find ourselves living at a time when people intentionally use Dr. King's words for causes that are the opposite of what he stood for? How do we navigate all the pretending? It's not a new phenomenon. People have been doing the same thing to the words of Jesus for two thousand years. The way we live in a world where people invoke Jesus or Dr. King for anything they want is when we turn to the apostle James for help. James Baldwin, I mean, who once wrote "One is in the impossible position of being unable to believe a word one's countrymen say. 'I can't believe what you say,' the song goes, 'because I see what you do.'" (repeat) Baldwin said if we want to know who people truly are then we must look at what they do. Otherwise, we risk being confused, misdirected, fooled by what they say, and bamboozled by the pretenders.

It is not what we say, or who we quote that matters, but what we do. As people of faith our actions must match our words otherwise, our words are just lip service. That is what it means to have integrity. The good news is that we are not the first generation to find ourselves in a world of insincerity. Jesus had a word for it in the gospels. He called it hypocrisy, he used for those who were playing, acting, or pretending to be good. By the time we get to the 3rd century, when the book of James was written, Christians we're struggling with issue of hypocrisy again and the question of whether people were practicing or pretending to be followers of Jesus.

Hypocrisy has plagued Christianity from the beginning, causing countless horrors from the Crusades to the Confederacy. It has led many to lose their faith in God, leave the church, or give up on religion. We see it today with prosperity gospel, Christian nationalists, and white moderates who King said are a greater stumbling block in his stride toward freedom than the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, because they are more devoted to 'order' than justice; prefer a negative peace or the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly say: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believe they can set the timetable for another person's freedom; who live by a mythical concept of time and constantly advise Black people to wait for a 'more convenient season.'"ⁱ



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To address hypocrisy in their community, the writer of the book of James counseled people to not be just hearers of the word, but doers as well. Furthermore, James said we must not have faith alone but work as well to accompany our faith. James went so far as to tell his people that believing in God doesn't make us any better than demons, because they believe in God too. Referencing Matthew 25, James said if someone is naked and lacks daily food we should not say, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and do nothing for their bodily needs. James asked, "What good is that?" There's no good at all in it! If we wish someone well but do nothing, we're just pretending to be good, pretending to have faith. So, James declared on multiple occasions, "faith without works is dead!"

Dr. King agreed. He once wrote, "it is my conviction that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of people but is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the souls is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."ⁱⁱⁱ A lot of people approach being a Christian as if it's as easy as changing our status on Facebook. "Ben Boswell is now in a relationship with Jesus." But all relationships require the same thing—WORK! Changing our status on social media doesn't mean anything if we don't do the work, because if we don't actively and intentionally work on our relationships, we will quickly find ourselves very different in a kind of relationship.

What is the work? James was clear at the very beginning of the letter, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." The work of religion is relationships. Not just with God, but with the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed. Love of God and neighbor is the crux of our faith, and we demonstrate our love for God is by loving our neighbors, especially the poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, housing insecure, and incarcerated. Our whole faith, the whole church, Jesus, God, spirituality, the gospels, the Bible, Christianity, Myers Park Baptist—it all comes down to this: our relationships with the poor, the vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed. Jesus understood this, James understood this, Dr. King understood this. So why do we struggle to hear the call to practice peace, justice, and equality, when it's so clear that is what our faith is about?

Because it is easier said than done. It's easier to confess Jesus as Lord than to follow him. It's easier to worship Christ than to follow Jesus of Nazareth. It is easier to pretend to have faith than to practice our faith. And the world is designed to make it easier, safer, nicer, warmer, and more comfortable to pretend. As soon as we try to practice things get public, political, and personal. Soon enough someone will say, "Why do we have to talk about all these social justice issues in church?"



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We've all heard it, and there's some truth in that question. Why do we describe social justice as "issues?" Is it so we don't say, "problems" or "conflicts?" I don't know where this came from, but I know one thing, the church is not supposed to have "issues." Followers of Jesus aren't supposed to have "issues." No, we don't have issues, what have is relationships.

The way we frame things matters. People of faith and churches aren't called to have a "stance" on issues. We are called to practice the life and teachings of Jesus in our relationships with others. When we frame it as having a stance on an issue, we take humanity out of it. We make it less personal. We dehumanize it so becomes a concept, and not a human being. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, we have relationships with LGBTQIA+ people, and we love and care for them by fighting for their rights. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of racism, we have relationships with white people and people of color, and we love and care for them by working diligently for racial and economic justice. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of immigration in this county, we have relationships with migrants and refugees, and we love and care for them by offering our hospitality. It's not about issues, it's always about relationships.

We don't have a stance on the *issue* of gun violence, we have relationships with our children and people we want to live long lives, so we advocate for a ban on assault rifles. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of reproductive justice, we have relationships with women who deserve autonomy, freedom, and access to health care. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of Israel-Palestine, we have relationships with Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, and Jews, so we call for a cease fire because we don't want to see anymore death and destruction. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of climate change, we have a relationship with the Earth and all God's creatures, so we organize for environmental justice. We don't have a stance on the *issue* of economic inequality in America, we have relationships with the poor, and fight for living wages. Don't be mistaken. It's never been about issues. It's always been about relationships.

Relationships are difficult and messy. We are human after all and we're not going to get it right all the time. Nobody has perfect integrity in every relationship. There are ups and downs in relationships, especially those we have with the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed. Everything is constantly changing because relationships are with other living beings who are also evolving all the time. That's why we need to be learners who are always open to growth, education, and evolution, ready to acknowledge when we miss the mark, eager to make amends, do better, and work harder to build a more just and equitable world. That's why we need grace, so that we can be patient with ourselves and other people, honest and genuine, open to feedback, never expecting the work of yesterday's relationships to be the same as the work that is needed for today's.



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Dr. King was human. He evolved. In fact, he was accused of hypocrisy on the most critical relationships of our time with Israel and Palestine. King had an extraordinary relationship with the Jewish community, and a great relationship with the Arab world as well. But when two groups of people we love and care for are in conflict, it becomes incredibly challenging to act with integrity in both relationships. In May of '67, with the Six-Day War on the horizon, King signed a statement with other theologians and religious leaders called "The Moral Responsibility in the Middle East" that sounded a call to arms for America to stand militarily with Israel.

The response was swift. The media accused King of being a hypocrite who abandoned his anti-war position. Arab journalists said he betrayed the Palestinian people. King later told his friends he regretted signing the statement. But after the Six-Day war, on June 18, King appeared on ABC and was asked, "Should Israel in your opinion give back the land she has taken in conflict without certain guarantees, such as security?" King answered, "For the ultimate peace and security of the situation it will probably be necessary for Israel to give up this conquered territory because to hold on to it will only exacerbate the tensions and deepen the bitterness of Arabs."ⁱⁱⁱ

What King said about the conflict was mixed, but what he did from that point on was incontrovertible. He cancelled a trip to Israel telling his associates, "I just think if I go, the Arab world, and Africa and Asia for that matter, would interpret this as endorsing everything that Israel has done." From that point on, King never spoke publicly about the conflict. Instead, he let his actions do the talking. He practiced what he preached. He found a way to maintain integrity in his relationships with both Jews and Palestinians, Israeli and Arabs. And as Baldwin said, we know what to believe about what King said because we saw what he did.

On this MLK weekend we will hear from many who will invoke King's words with no intention of following them, just as they do with Jesus. They will be pretending, but not us. Not this church! No, we're not pretending, are we? We are for real. We're the kind of people who hear the word *and* do it. We're the kind of people who have faith *and* it works. We're the kind of people who live out our faith with love, peace, justice, and liberation, who believe none of us are free until all of us are free. We're not the kind of people who have social justice *issues* or *issues* with social justice.



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No, we're the kind of people who have relationships with the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed—the kind of people who love and care for LGBTQIA+ people. Black and Brown people, immigrants and indigenous, women, children, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims, the Earth, and all God's creatures. We're not the pretenders, we are the practitioners of the words of Jesus and the words of King. We might not get it right all the time or be perfect in the things we say, but as long as we are the kind of people who don't want to be pretenders, who never give up and who never surrender, then we're the witnesses who ensure the true King and the true Jesus will be remembered, and our world and our lives will be that much better.

ⁱ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Kramer, "In the Words of Martin Luther King," in Martin Kramer, *The War on Error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2016), 253-67.