

There once was a good king.

The good King delivered a sermon for the ages at the March On Washington, promoted nonviolence as the key to achieving racial justice.

This good King also served as a friend and adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson that made it possible to pass major civil rights and voting rights legislation.

The good King was a revered Christian pastor and family man.

But one day, he was senselessly killed.

Everyone loved this good King and wanted to make sure that his message would not be forgotten.

So, the government decided to create a federal holiday for him.

Every year, a Monday near his birthday in January would be set aside to remember his goodness and his legacy.

There was also a bad King.

The bad King only had a 25% approval rating at the time of his death.

The bad King was threatening to economic stability.

He was criticized by newspapers, clergy and politicians.

He boldly denounced the Vietnam War as being immoral, and he took on the entire policy of the United States government.

President Johnson who had been his friend, was no longer friends with the bad King, he cut off all contact with him.

Many black Americans—including many old allies and colleagues from his civil rights years—warned that his stance on the Vietnam War could have devastating consequences for their cause.

Not content with the gains made in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the bad King resolved to pursue a more aggressive socioeconomic and political agenda.

Part of his agenda called for an American citizenship expansive enough to guarantee jobs, housing, food, and justice to all the poor living in a vast sea of wealth.

This bad King was arrested over 29 times.

His family was threatened many times, and his house was bombed.

Several people tried to kill the bad king, until one day, they were successful.

On April 4, 1968, they killed the bad King.

I tell you the tale of these two King's because I think that so often, many pieces of Dr. King's life and legacy are left out of the narrative.

Today, his approval rating is over 90%, and that would make sense based upon what we hear about him.

The newsreel footage is carefully cropped to show his countless confrontations with vicious, inflammatory bigots.

And we all know his magnificent oratory that day in August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial when he gave his “I Have a Dream,” speech, one that might be the most famous in modern history.

Overly narrow historical memories typically serve a purpose, which is why we only hear about the good King.

In this case, it is far more comforting to focus on Dr. King’s success in making a bad part of the country better, than to remember his efforts to push the whole of America to become what he knew we were capable of.

Today, I think that most of us can say with all honesty that we agree with his teachings, that we would follow him and support him if he were still alive.

But would you have felt that way if you lived in Alabama in the 1960’s?

What if he had asked you to join the bus boycott or the march from Selma to Montgomery?

What would you have done?

What if your best friend owned the diner where the lunch counter sit-in was held?

What if your pastor was preaching about racism and segregation and Jim Crow from the pulpit on a regular basis?

Would you have supported your pastor and gone to church and gotten involved in the movement?

Or would you have changed churches because you didn't want to hear about that stuff every week?

But it wasn't all about race for Dr. King, it was also about nonviolence, so would you have stood against the Vietnam war?

What if you had loved ones who were actively serving?

You're a white person.

If you had supported any of these things, you would have been seen as a traitor by many people in your community for following the bad, black King.

What if you lost friends?

What if you were exiled from your community?

What if your neighbors wouldn't talk to you because they know you marched from Selma?

What if your family was threatened?

I ask you these questions because there were many well-meaning white Christians in the south who disappeared when Dr. King needed their help.

In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he writes:

*“I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership...*

*I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church.*

*I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.*

*When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church.*

*I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies.*

*Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.*

*In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure.*

*I had hoped that each of you would understand.*

*But again I have been disappointed...*

*In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.*

*In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern."...*

*I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states...*

*I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward...*

*Over and over I have found myself asking:*

*"What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?..."*

*Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred?*

*Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"*

*Yes, these questions are still in my mind.*

*In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church.*

*But be assured that my tears have been tears of love...*

*Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise?*

*I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers.*

*Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh!*

*How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.”*

If Rev. Dr. King were alive today and if he wrote a letter to UCC Burlington from within a jail cell, what would his letter say?

Would he be disappointed in us or would he be proud that we had partnered with him for social change?

I think he'd be proud of some things we have done, like having a racial justice training and reading the books Waking Up White and Between the World and Me.

Both books are about racism in the United States, and Waking Up White gave us tangible tools of how to address it.

And we do show up at marches, rallies and vigils.

But we could be doing more.

I think he'd be disappointed in the fact that our staff is all white, and we haven't intentionally worked to connect with communities of color.

We could look at the missions we support and make sure we partner with at least one that is doing racial justice work.

We could interrogate our worship style and make sure that the songs we sing, the stories we hear and the biblical interpretations that we hear are from diverse racial backgrounds.

Yes, we have done some work, but there's always more to do.

Unfortunately, if you look across our nation, 51 years after Dr. King was killed, things haven't improved in many ways.

We still have gross economic and educational disparities along racial lines.

The number of incarcerated people of color has sky rocketed since Dr. King was alive, and people of color are under-represented across all levels of government and in most board rooms.

Voting rights continue to come under attack through purging the rolls and enforcing unjust identification policies which are meant to target African Americans.

Gerrymandering is another way of systematically disempowering people of color from having an equal voice in choosing elected officials.

Yes, friends, we have a long way to go.

Racism is an insidious illness that we have not cured ourselves of, but it's not only racism that Dr. King fought against.

He knew that our destinies are tied together, all of us.