

MLK Day 2012 Reflection: Courage for our Caution!

By Tiauna Boyd

This Dr. King Holiday, I pause to remember the eulogy Dr King delivered for the little girls who were killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963. I pause to imagine the heavy sense of grief surrounding that church community as they faced the loss of four of God's children. I pause to consider the vicious outcomes of racism that claimed the lives of many of our brothers and sisters during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Michelle Alexander's book The New Jim Crow- Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, prompts me to consider that although racism comes in different forms, and by different names, the outcomes are just as vicious. Today, the incarceration rates of African American men and women continue to inflate and explode, leaving our communities of faith grieving all across this nation.

This MLK Day, I pause to imagine what we might say to Dr. King at such a time as this.

Dear Dr. King,

Police officers and SWAT teams sweep through our communities (carried by strong winds of governmental perversion), to round up millions of our young Black brothers and sisters on behalf of the "War on Drugs."¹ So many of our brothers, daughters, fathers, sons and mothers now populate the Prison Industrial Complex and are absent from our homes.

Dear Dr. King,

Facing the loss of our loved ones from our homes, we often retreat into silent silos of hopelessness. Facing the loss of so many loved ones from our church communities, we often are debilitated by our collective grief, and a myriad of silent eulogies buried under our shame reverberate from the walls of our churches. The names of our loved ones (those who are locked up and locked out of society by the "War on Drugs" and the New Jim Crow), go unspoken as we ignore the tragic outcomes of racism in this present day.²

Dear Dr. King,



Look down and see the pieces of our children's shattered dreams. These are children who have lost mothers and fathers to this epidemic, scattered across this nation. Look down and see our mothers and fathers (who are caught up in this system) return home, stripped of their human dignity and self-worth. Look down and see this criminalization and dehumanization process crystallize as re-entering citizens are branded "felon" and are legally discriminated against the rest of their lives.³

Dear Dr. King,

Consider the facts:

- There are more African Americans under correctional control today (in prison or jail, on probation or parole) than were enslaved in 1850.⁴
- Over 40% of all drug arrests are for marijuana possession—a drug that is prevalent in the "hood" and some believe it is less harmful than alcohol and tobacco. As a result, middle-class and upper-middle class White young adults who possess and use marijuana are going to college while Black men & boys who do the same thing are being swept into jails.⁵
- The recent disintegration of the African American family is correlated in large part to the mass imprisonment of Black fathers.⁶

This MLK Day, I also pause to imagine what Dr. King would say to the Church at such a time as this.

Perhaps Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would point to his eulogy for the four martyred children in Birmingham, and say to the Church that the tragic facts listed above all "have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows."⁷

Perhaps Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would say that we, in the Black church, who have "passively accepted the evil"⁸ that undergirds the corrupt criminal justice system in this nation, we "who have stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice", we must make a substitution and commitment in this New Year.

⁹We must take up "**courage for our caution.**"¹⁰

This MLK Day, Dr. King might encourage us to courageously believe that we will all be free from shame and silence when we begin to speak the truth and tell how mass incarceration affects our lives.

This MLK Day, Dr. King might encourage us to courageously believe that we will all be free from the vicious outcomes of racism when we act to address the needs of our children who have incarcerated parents.

This MLK Day, Dr. King might encourage us to courageously believe that we will all be free from criminalization and dehumanization when we integrate re-entry programs into our prison ministries and work in partnership with community organizations to provide job placement, rehabilitation services and housing assistance for brothers and sisters returning home from prison.

In this New Year, in this new season, let us have the courage to **speak**, the courage to **act** and the courage to **believe**!

God grant us courage for our caution!

Amen and Ashae

Do you want to get involved? Join the movement to dismantle the New Jim Crow at:
Tobefreeatlast.net

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:...For I was in prison and you came to Me.....inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me’”

(Matthew 25:34-40 -- NKJV)

Notes

1. Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness New York: The New Press, 2010, pp. 73-75.

2. Ibid., p 247.

3. Ibid., p 92.

4. Ibid., p 175.

5. Ibid., p 222.

6. Ibid., p 175.

7. Martin Luther King Jr., “Eulogy for the Martyred Children”, 18 September 1963, The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, King Papers Project, Stanford, California.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.