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Remembering Dr. King

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 14, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Monday is the day the nation will commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I understand entirely why some choose to mark the day by engaging in some specific work of social justice, by going out to feed the hungry or clothe the naked. It is a beautiful way to remember Dr. King. But only, and I repeat the adverb, only if we have first learned about Dr. King.

There is no mystery to learning about King. Taylor Branch?s three-volume history of the King years is a magnificent read, books that should be in the library of any and every American who considers themselves learned, and re-read as occasion demands and opportunity affords. Branch?s volumes are very accessible and I am sure any college student or very focused high school student could read them. I am a desperately slow reader, but I raced through all three volumes. Until the last one hundred pages. Of course, I knew how the story ended. We all know what happened when he went to Memphis to rally the garbage workers and to fight for their justice. But, having read these books and fallen in love with King in a way I had not before, I did not want to read about Memphis. I did not want the story to end. When I forced myself to read those last hundred pages, I wept. And wept and wept. Here was a great, a truly great American.

We all know that he changed America as much as any of the Presidents who served in the White House while he served the country, first as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and then Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta. But, what was the secret of his success? Overcoming racism is not a small accomplishment and changing not only the laws but the conscience of a nation is an achievement of the highest order. I believe there are many reasons for King?s success, but none more central than the fact that he combined so powerfully two often conflicting strains in American social thought, our commitment to Enlightenment principles regarding human rights and the deep cultural roots of evangelical Christianity.

Everyone has a favorite part of Dr. King?s ?I Have a Dream? speech. Here is mine: ?I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.? The idea that suffering is creative and redemptive is an explicitly Christian notion, and King placed it at the heart of the struggle for civil rights.

Of course, the political left praised King but many conveniently forgot the Christian inspiration at the heart of his life and work. By way of example, just yesterday, I was reading an editorial in the New York Times from 1989, when the Rev. Jerry Falwell disbanded the Moral Majority. The editors of the Times wrote of Falwell?s religio-political organization: ?Americans, even the most religious, are uncomfortable when their leaders and their movements turn to politics, especially when the religious component appears to be narrow or sectarian.? Certainly the editors at the Times were not made ?uncomfortable? by Dr. King?s involvement in politics. And, while some may argue that King was not ?narrow? as Falwell was, I would counter that on an issue like abortion or prayer in the schools, the editors at the Times were as narrow in their liberalism as Falwell was in his fundamentalism. There is a quality to liberal political discourse in the post-King era, that while they refer to ?Dr. King? they seem to think his doctorate was in engineering and not divinity.

Monday, whatever else you do to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, take a moment and watch the

video or read the text of King?s ?I Have a Dream? speech. It is so powerful, if watching it does not bring you to tears, you have no heart and should call your doctor. I do not doubt that it will continue many people to work on behalf of social justice. But, before we get inspired to attend to the present or the future, take a moment to recall the past, the distinctly Christian worldview of this great American, and how his ability to bring his liberalism and his Baptist Christianity together fruitfully, made him, hands down, the greatest American of his time.

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