

## Readings for July 30, 2023

### MLK, Jr. Sermon “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”

Many persons will realize the urgency of seeking to eradicate the evil of segregation. There will be many Negroes who will devote their lives to the cause of freedom. There will be many white persons of goodwill and strong moral sensitivity who will dare to take a stand for justice. Honesty impels me to admit that such a stand will require willingness to suffer and sacrifice. So don’t despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian. Don’t worry about persecution, America; you are going to have that if you stand up for a great principle. I can say this with some authority, because my life was a continual round of persecutions. After my conversion I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem. Later I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem. I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens. And yet I am still going. I came away from each of these experiences more persuaded than ever before that “neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.

I must bring my writing to a close now. Timothy is waiting to deliver this letter, and I must take leave for another church. But just before leaving, I must say to you, as I said to the church at Corinth, that I still believe that love is the most durable power in the world. Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good. This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy. This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy. The Epicurean and the Stoics sought to answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it. What is the *summon bonum* of life? I think I have an answer, America. I think I have discovered the highest good. It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos. As John says, “God is love.” He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God.”

So American Christians, you may master the intricacies of the English language. You may possess all of the eloquence of articulate speech. But even if you “speak with the tongues of man and angels, and have not love, you are become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”

You may have the gift of prophecy and understanding all mysteries. You may be able to break into the storehouse of nature and bring out many insights that men never dreamed were there. You may ascend to the heights of academic achievement, so that you will have all knowledge. You may boast of your great

institutions of learning and the boundless extent of your degrees. But all of this amounts to absolutely nothing devoid of love.

But even more Americans, you may give your goods to feed the poor. You may give great gifts to charity. You may tower high in philanthropy. But if you have not love it means nothing. You may even give your body to be burned, and die the death of a martyr. Your spilt blood may be a symbol of honor for generations yet unborn, and thousands may praise you as history's supreme hero. But even so, if you have not love your blood was spilt in vain.<sup>13</sup> You must come to see that it is possible for a man to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. He may be generous in order to feed his ego and pious in order to feed his pride. Man has the tragic capacity to relegate a heightening virtue to a tragic vice. Without love benevolence becomes egotism, and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride.

So the greatest of all virtues is love. It is here that we find the true meaning of the Christian faith. This is at bottom the meaning of the cross. The great event on Calvary signifies more than a meaningless drama that took place on the stage of history. It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power drunk generation that love is most durable power in the world, and that it is at bottom the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. Only through achieving this love can you expect to matriculate into the university of eternal life.

I must say goodbye now. I hope this letter will find you strong in the faith. It is probable that I will not get to see you in America, but I will meet you in God's eternity. And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling, and lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy, to him be power and authority, forever and ever. Amen.

### **I Corinthians 13**

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body\* so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a

child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

\* Other ancient authorities read *body to be burned*