

“America’s Greatest Citizen”

Fifty years ago today, the man aptly called “America’s Greatest Citizen” and the “moral leader of our nation” was struck down by an assassin’s bullet. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., knew that awful day was at hand; indeed, it became inevitable once he expanded his crusade from combatting racism to combatting the “twin evils of poverty and militarism.”

As we all know, he was in Memphis to stand in solidarity with striking sanitation workers. Many in the Movement questioned his decision to go to Memphis. He was tired, he was spreading himself too thin, he was exposing himself to unnecessary dangers.

In his final speech, given the night before he was murdered, he invoked the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain why he had come. He imagined that the passers-by who refused to help the man who had been robbed might have been afraid. Perhaps the robbers were still around. Perhaps it was a trap. “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” they asked.

The Good Samaritan reversed the question, Dr. King explained: “*If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?*” the Good Samaritan asked. And that was the question before Dr. King on his last night on earth: “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?”

In the 50 years since Dr. King’s murder, the triple evils of racism, militarism, and poverty have become more entrenched. Although there is no MLK to lead us, and it is unlikely we will ever see his like in our lifetimes, he never lost hope, nor should we: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The only way to honor the man is to continue his work.

In the prophetic closing of his final speech, he acknowledged and accepted the fact that his life would be shortened, but added that it would not deter him. [That speech](#) is worth reading, and rereading, as is the speech he delivered at the Riverside Church exactly one year prior to his assassination, [Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence](#).

Taylor Branch’s magisterial trilogy (*Parting the Waters/Pillar of Fire/At Canaan’s Edge*) and Coretta Scott King’s autobiography, *My Life, My Loves, My Legacy*, are well worth reading.

MKC
April 4, 2018