

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

WARRIOR AGAINST “RATIONAL IGNORANCE”



On a warm, sunny day in Washington, D.C., a young Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. strode to a podium positioned on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to give a momentous speech.

Not the one you’re probably thinking of.

Six years before his historic “I Have a Dream” address in front of hundreds of thousands amassed on the Capitol Mall, King gave what became known as the “Give Us the Ballot” speech in front of a much smaller crowd. It was May, 1957, and King’s remarks were the culmination of a “Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom” – an event commemorating the three-year anniversary of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but also imploring the president and Congress to take what should have been the logical next step: to ensure complete and free access to the ballot box for all African Americans.

As he would in his later, more famous speech, King used repetition to drive home his demand. With four simple words he called for protection of the right to vote: “Give us the ballot.”

“Give us the ballot,” King says, “and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.”

“Give us the ballot,” King continues, “and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the South.”

“Give us the ballot,” King proclaims, “and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.”

“Give us the ballot,” King preaches (alluding to the words of Micah 6:8), “and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy.”

“Give us the ballot,” King concludes, “and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court’s decision of May seventeenth, 1954.”

So what would King think of the woeful voter turnout results of recent elections – whether here in the Los Angeles area, statewide in California, or nationally?

As someone who studies and encourages greater civic participation, I’ve come to agree with the political scientists who conclude that a major reason for the low levels of voter engagement is a dynamic known as “rational ignorance” – the belief that since our one vote probably won’t affect the outcome of a political race, it is a rational response to be ignorant of politics as a whole.

If there was ever a man who demolished the arguments in support of rational ignorance it was Martin Luther King, Jr. He knew that while any one of us might not have power on our own, collectively, through the powerful mechanism of the voting booth, we can enable America to pay off its “promissory note” from our Founding on the promise of freedom for all, as King would later say.

But King did not stop there. As a Christian, he also knew that to confront the human challenges of cynicism and hopelessness, which often undergird rational ignorance, we had to rely on the hope that could most effectively be derived from our faith. Later in this same speech, King consoles, “There is something in our Christian faith, at the center of it, which says to us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter.”

In this national election year, let us all remember the great emphasis King placed on the power of the vote, and the ultimate price he paid for it. Never again will an American citizen need to demand the right to vote from our government. “Give us the ballot”, is simply a request we can all make of an election official after we have registered to vote.

“I want to remind all who are listening that a democratic society cannot meet its full potential of achievement unless all of its citizens exercise their right to register and to vote,” said Martin Luther King, Jr. in a radio spot leading up to the 1964 national election. He continued, “I urge all of you, my fellow Americans to make America a showplace of true democracy.”

King’s words speak across the decades to us in 2016. So on this day commemorating one of America’s greatest citizens, let us look for ways – as an exercise of our faith and citizenship – to “make America a showplace of true democracy.”

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*And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Micah 6:8