

“The Power in Proximity”

I am honored to speak today at this service in honor of Doctor Martin Luther King. Doctor King was, of course, the face of civil rights, but first, he was a man of God. From everything I have read about him, he tried daily to walk that path, and like Jesus, wanted to bring people together in unity and in love.

Love is not easy. Almost ten years of marriage and an 8-year old daughter has taught me that. Love is such an easy one-syllable word to say, but the action itself is often hard and exhausting. It's not something you can just do or let happen. Love changes you. You have to be involved. You have to work and adapt and maintain love; otherwise, it can die. It can turn on you and become ugly. You cannot become complacent in love.

Love. That's what Doctor King's dream was about. And as you may sit here, 50 years after his death, wondering if the dream that we all want to be a reality is still accomplishable, I'm here, standing, telling you, yes it is. And it's time for you to work. It is time for your generosity, hospitality, compassion and most all, your love, to act.

I am the daughter of two African-American parents. My mom is 63, and my dad is 76. They were raised in Selma, Alabama in a time where being who they were could easily get you hurt, attacked, or killed, should you happen to offend the wrong white person. So, they were not overflowing with joy when I came home completely in love with my very white husband from Massachusetts, of all places. At the time. I couldn't understand how they could be so intolerant. But it was not intolerance; it was fear. Fear from what they had experienced in their childhood, fear that I was placing myself in a situation that would constantly make me the token person of color. Even after my daughter was born, there was fear. Fear for how the world would accept or not accept her and her multiracial magic. For a while, I thought nothing would fix it. We lived through awkward moments and situations until the NBA playoffs. My mom came down to visit during the playoffs and I found her, and my husband laughing and screaming at the TV, at the ref and players. It was beautiful. They had found something they loved and could share together. Now, the fact that they both

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love me and Ella should, to some, have been enough. But that love was obvious. What my mother needed was the connection. Now, many years later, they will text or call to talk about basketball and the ridiculous and often troubling passion my dad still has for the Knicks. Her love of Curry and Lebron, and his appreciation of those classic Celtics and Spurs teams, has brought them together in a way nothing else could. They are friends, so much so that this summer after the awful events in Charlottesville, my mom picked up the phone and digested her response with my husband. Not to, but with, because while they watched basketball, and they talked, they were able to get to know each other as more than a mom/grandma, or a husband/dad. They knew the other understood their fears, and also knew that they shared them. From disparate experiences, they found their common ground. Power in proximity. This is how we find our shared humanity.

However, some differences are exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. No one is better than anyone else. Sadly, there are people who still believe that because of their race, gender, economic status, or some checkbox they use to ascribe their self-worth, they are superior to others. We may never be able to change their view, but we also do not have to accept it. This past year has tested our ability to love. It has been tumultuous, to say the very least, for many of us. We have discovered things about those we love, family and friends, that we didn't know or didn't want to really acknowledge. How many years have we sat and allowed our racist uncle to say something we knew should be corrected? How many injustices against someone who identifies as trans or gay or lesbian have you seen, or heard, and ignored? We are all guilty. We have been complacent in fighting for those who need us to be their soldiers. Because of this, we have seen our country torn into so many pieces of hate, loss, anger, and desperation that we have become overwhelmed with sadness and grief ourselves. We have witnessed gun violence in places where we are supposed to feel safe. We have had no justice for crimes committed by people who are supposed to protect all of us. The dream that was becoming a reality seems to have been just that, a dream. Politically, we look back to years past and we see achievements. In the sixties, the civil rights movement championed by Doctor King led to Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act. Perfect? No, but it was hope. It was a moment to say yes, we can do this, and to reflect on so much promise to come. When Obama was elected and re-elected, change and hope were more alive than ever. We saw some progress in what it meant to

care for everyone, even though, again, it wasn't perfect. But now the meaning of change has shifted. For some, the reality of America led by our current president is overwhelming. For so many, their dreams are always nightmares, and when they wake up every day, they grasp that it wasn't just merely a bad dream. This nightmare is much more of a reality than it ever was. The idea that America is for everyone is becoming less and less of a foundational belief, replaced instead by the belief that America is solely for those who look or act the way they believe is "American".

So now how do we fight that? We fight with Love. What do you love? Get close to it. Love +Proximity= Power go to it!

Doctor King once said the threat we face is not at the hands of our enemies, but is at the silence of our friends. Friends are the ones that support you, the family you choose versus the one you are born into. At times, they drive us crazy; at others, they inspire us and help us. But when they don't defend us, when they let us down by not supporting us, we are devastated. That betrayal cuts deeper than any others

So, let's change the narrative.

Identify oppressed people. Consider how you can use your "abilities". Money. Time. Connections. Talents.

Service allows you to connect and give power to others that need that stepping stone.

The time for fear and anger is over. We need to stop being outraged but complacent in action. Do something! Why? Because you have the ability. Use it. Volunteer somewhere, especially a place you don't feel comfortable. If anyone can, it is you. Bring all of your love and compassion to those you can help. Show compassion for those who are suffering and are oppressed. Sure, you can rally. Show those who are determined to never see us become unified that they are outnumbered. But remember, wearing a pink hat or a safety pin, or putting a sign on your lawn one day doesn't help if for the other 364 you do nothing. Give time to those who are rejected and lost. Proximity is essential. Get closer to the people who suffer from injustice the most. As Bryan Stevenson says, Proximity equals power. Touch it. Become part of it.

Being an ally is different than simply wanting to not be racist, sexist, or homophobic. I think everyone here understands that. (Thank you for that, by the way). Being an ally requires you to educate yourself about systemic oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, and the many other inequalities in this country, but more importantly, it requires you to act. The world outside can be dangerous, and not just because of those who do harm and evil, but because there are more people who look on and do nothing.

DONATE yourself. Your presence and impact can change everything.

I was watching a wildlife show a few weeks ago that discussed the impact of two wolves that were released into Yellowstone Park. We know the wolf as a creature feared by man and often it's portrayed as a villain. But I learned that despite its bad reputation in the Bible, the wolf is a magnificent creature, and we humans share many commonalities with it. For example, like our fingerprints, a wolf's howl is an identifier unique to each one. The program spoke of a "trophic cascade". The term "trophic" refers to the different levels of a food chain. Plants are one trophic level, insects the next, all the way down. However, the "cascade" now makes us look at the traditional food chain from a different perspective.

Picture a small stream flowing through the woods. The stream comes to a waterfall, or cascade. As the stream falls over the edge of the cascade, it hits a rock and splits, then each of those waterfalls hits another rock and splinters again. You end up with a single stream at the top scattering out into many cascades.

So, the trophic cascade. A large carnivore at the top of the food chain is just like the little stream – its effects on the rest of the ecosystem splinter out over all of the trophic levels. In other words, when wild wolves returned to an ecosystem, by chasing and hunting their prey and competing with other species, they help restore balance to the ecosystem.

Since wild wolves have returned to Yellowstone, the elk and deer are stronger, the aspens and willows are healthier, and the grasses taller. When the wolves chase elk during the hunt, the elk are forced to run faster and farther. As the elk run, their hooves aerate the soil, allowing more grasses to grow. Since the

elk cannot remain in one area for too long, aspens and willows in one area are not heavily grazed, and therefore can fully recover between migrations.

Coyote populations were nearly out of control in Yellowstone before the wolves returned. Now, the coyotes have been out-competed and essentially reduced by 80 percent in areas occupied by wolves. The coyotes that do remain are more skittish and wary. With fewer coyotes hunting small rodents, raptors like the eagle and osprey have more prey and are making a comeback. The endangered grizzly bears successfully stole wolf kills more often than not, and thus have more food to feed their cubs.

By just adding the wolves to the climate, the whole system benefits. A wild wolf population actually makes for a stronger, healthier, and more balanced ecosystem.

We need to be the wolves. We need to place ourselves back into the chain at the top, restore order and rebalance the ecosystem. We need to restore everyone's ability to thrive, even if they have no idea it's helping them.

Jesus's actions show us that your effect on society doesn't have to begin as world-impacting; it just needs to impact your part of the world. From there, it will spread. Every human you interact with will play a part in your trophic cascade. This is more than paying it forward. We must work to ensure that the coyotes that remain are afraid and wary of disturbing the balance that we have attained. The coyotes who will never change their ways or their minds are free to live and go about living their lives, but we will not tolerate them preying on others and causing chaos in our world.

And now a warning: It's going to be uncomfortable, you will not like what you see of others, and sometimes you may not like what you find in yourself. That is ok. Don't let race, or gender, or sexuality, or income disparity, or any other factor distract you from doing your work. Be willing to feel that ickiness, for that means you are growing. That means you are becoming powerful. Whenever things break, something is released. When you grow, it's never easy. You're going to make mistakes — expect this. But keep helping. You are allowed to make mistakes. It's human and it's expected. Just being there speaks for itself.

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So, I've said all of these things you need to do, but who the heck am I? What am I doing? Well, I'm here. Despite being a teacher, speaking in front of large crowds is an anxiety-producing action for me. But I know that you need to hear that you are wanted, because you are. You need to hear that you can help, because God knows you can, and you need to hear that you are not alone in thinking how seriously scary all of these actions seem to be. You can make a difference. Give what time or money you can to something you are passionate about. Love theater? Find a program, and volunteer to teach a class or help with a production, or sew a few costumes. Love cooking? Make your favorite dish and bring it to a women's shelter. Give what you love to others that love it, and more importantly need it, as well.

So, what am I doing? Where do I fit in this ever-changing dialogue?

For me, it's helping at pushing people into the uncomfortable conversations about our factual history in order to make sure we don't have such a gap in knowledge and understanding of who we are as a nation. My dream is to see education EDUCATE and have all stories and points of view heard. There is no right or wrong, only truth. This isn't my story. It's our story. It's this nation's story, full of deceit, murder, love, revenge, power, villains, and most importantly, heroes. I want my legacy to be one that inspires others to learn from and connect to all people in this world. Our differences are small in comparison to the things we have in common and the love we can give and share.

In closing, I share with you a quote from Pope Francis's mission statement. "More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us, 'Give them something to eat.'" We need to open our doors, start our trophic cascade, and become the best heroes we can. Let our dream become a permanent reality and let's use love to heal.