

Crossroads: Episode 24

Realize the Dream with Martin Luther King III and Arndrea Waters King

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations, featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens. On today's episode, we welcome Martin Luther King III. As the oldest son of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Mrs. Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King III is a thought leader on the world stage, a peacemaker, and a negotiator on some of today's most critical national and international platforms for social change.

We also welcome his wife, Arndrea Waters King, who has dedicated herself to public service as a passionate leader in the global fight against inequity, injustice and hate crimes. Together, they have started Realize the Dream, a bold call for all of us to reach out to people and causes in need, and help make our communities stronger through acts of love, compassion and goodwill.

Also joining in our conversation is the Cathedral's own Canon Missioner, the Rev. Leonard Hamlin. Well, welcome. This is such an exciting episode, and I am delighted to have you all here with us. First, I want to say welcome to Martin and Arndrea. Thank you so much for being here.

Martin Luther King III

Thank you.

Arndrea Waters King

Thank you for having us.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And tell us, where are you joining us from?

Arndrea Waters King

We happen to be in Atlanta today. Atlanta is our home. However, we are traveling quite frequently nowadays. In fact, Martin, you just got in late last night.

Martin Luther King III

That's correct, where was I? Oh, New York. Yes.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Fantastic. Well, I'm glad that you all could be together for this episode. And welcome also to Leonard. How are you today, Leonard?

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

Wonderful. Of course, here in Washington, D.C., but grateful to be on here with Martin and Arndrea.

Martin Luther King III

As are we.

Arndrea Waters King

It always is a pleasure to be with our friend, Rev. Hamlin.

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

Thank you, I was excited.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I feel the same way. I am so intrigued by the notion of legacy that you lay out in your book, *What Is My Legacy*. But I want to start us with one of Howard Thurman's most famous quotes. He says, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Which leads me to wonder, Martin, you have inherited quite a legacy. But just because we've inherited something, it doesn't make us necessarily come alive. So I'm wondering what's at the center of your Venn diagram of legacy, serving the world, and what makes you come alive?

Martin Luther King III

Probably what makes me come alive more than, as I'll say, secondly. First is my wife, but secondly, is our daughter and young people every day. And yesterday I was in schools in Great Neck, New York, and I spoke to, I don't know, a thousand kids. And to hear the energy and innovation and the desire to create a better world, it elevates and lifts one up.

And the fact of the matter is, obviously, my father and mother, but my dad articulated a vision for our nation and world that just has not come fulfilled yet. But to hear and see young people engage. As we walked through, the energy was very positive and very excited about not just us being there, but the kind of world that they want to create for themselves, their families, and generations yet unborn. That is so exciting.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Amen to that. Well how about you Arndrea? What makes you come alive? What's at your Venn diagram center there.

Arndrea Waters King

Certainly I would echo my husband, as well as our daughter, and faith. And I also would say at the core is the creation of the beloved community. To really ignite our nation and world, to find themselves within the King legacy, and to be an ambassador and to encourage others to be ambassadors of creating that beloved community.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Amen. All right, Leonard, I'm going to turn the question to you now. What's at the center of your Venn diagram?

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

Well, I appreciate the answers that I've heard. And both Martin and Arndrea have put me on the spot that I have to say first, my wife, if I want to get off this call.

But I would say it is true, though, and that's why I appreciate what is so evident with the two of them. When it comes to family, when it comes to faith, and for me, I probably will say this the same way because it intersects but just a little bit differently, is that what makes me come alive is the possibilities of what we can be.

And when we're looking at our individual selves, when we're looking at community, as has been raised, the possibilities are really fascinating and exciting of living and becoming our

best selves. Whichever way we would like to approach that subject or talk about it. But that kind of work draws me and calls me every day.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And so much of what you all are doing, you're talking and you're listening and incorporating what people have within themselves and inspiring them to draw from within themselves, to give back to the world. And that's such a needed gift in our world these days. So, Arndrea, you and Martin founded Realize the Dream, and you co-wrote *What Is My Legacy*.

And now you all have a podcast as well. So how are you bringing your background on working on behalf of those who have been marginalized and victims of hate crimes? How are you bringing all of that together in your work now?

Arndrea Waters King

Well, I had the immense honor to put together the nation's first national hate crime summit, where all communities that have or are impacted by hate came together and looked at how the intersectionality before that was a thing. And so that, to this day, has informed me of the importance and the beauty of diversity and unity. And that goes back to that connection of which, you know, we are all linked together, and humanity truly as brothers and sisters in ways in which we really can't fathom.

It also resonates when we talk about agape love being the highest, not the only level of love, but certainly the highest. And what I like to remind people is that most of the other levels of love are sentimental. Agape is not sentimental. It's an acknowledgment of our connection and our shared humanity, all as children of God. Certainly, that has informed and will always inform my work as long as I'm living.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Amen. Martin or Leonard, do you have any follow up to those wonderful words from Arndrea?

Martin Luther King III

Well, one of the things I would say, as it relates to what we hope that we're always infusing into the world, and I think everything is energy. And it's so critically important that we are connected to our foundations. Now, although our nation and world is comprised of a lot of different ethnicities, a lot of different religious beliefs, and the human experience, you know, for me, and I think for us personally, our foundation is our faith.

And we go back to that faith each and every day. And the inspiration that we derive from what we believe, we want to infuse into the world. Not that you have to be a Christian, or you have to be a Muslim, or you have to be of the Jewish faith or any faith, because I think the world we have to navigate through and find a way to be inclusive of each and every person.

My dad, you know, worked with people who some would say were atheist or agnostic, and yet they had tremendous belief in what he and others were trying to create and chose to join. If your intention is to create a better nation and world, and as it relates to legacy, every family, every person has a legacy. We want people to understand that you don't have to have a monumental legacy.

Everybody can create something each and every day to make the world a better place. And it really is about connecting. Some people want to be happy. We all want to be happy, but we believe ultimately, it's fulfillment. It starts with connection. We are so disconnected because of so many factors. We have to bring people back to the freight.

Say, I want to be connected. The reality is, when we are connected, it's far easier to address what my father identified as the triple evils of poverty, racism, and violence. But if we're not connected, we may not ever address those issues. And while that's what he identified, there are issues that are very much relevant to our society and our world and what he and his team, my mom and her team demonstrated is it only takes a few good human beings to bring about change.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So true. And thinking about happiness versus fulfillment. Happiness is very individualistic and fulfillment is very conventional, just as you said. And if we are connecting with others, then we're going to see their needs and want to help address it. And it's not about us. But the more we're serving and helping and caring for others, the more we actually do find our own happiness.

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

Very much so, Jo. I appreciate the opportunity as we're having this conversation because as we move through life, there are certain things that we can take for granted. We just believe that they're just present and miss the value of them. Even as we're talking about this, and we're living in a challenging moment, and is really also a moment of opportunity for us to reevaluate, to raise these conversations, to put our values sort of in the light of where they need to be.

Much has been talked about, when we speak about this connection and permanence and temporary. So much talk lately has been about things being transactional or relational, and they are, as we said, there are many things that are transactional, and they are for the moment, and they do have their place. But unless we have the kind of relationships with one another, then the future outlook is going to be very dim.

It is going to be questioned in ways that are not helping us to move into what we would call brighter and better days. And so as we are looking at the connections, community, and relationships building that we're not just doing it for the moment, we're doing it for our future, for the generations that are coming behind us. And that's why I'm grateful, as this talk of legacy and the book that the Kings have, of course, penned and are offering to others can challenge us to think not just about the moment that we're in.

The bookshelves are filled with those how to live today, but we disconnect ourselves when we're looking at the future.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Very well said, Leonard. And I'm thinking about Realize the Dream and connection with legacy. Martin and Arndrea, would you tell our listeners a little bit about Realize the Dream? What is this initiative and how can people get involved?

Arndrea Waters King

It is an initiative which, at its heart, is our love offering, not only to all of those who have come before us, and in particular, Martin's father, but also a love offering and how we can heal. We believe our communities and our nation at a time when we are more disconnected than ever. We're disconnected from ourselves or disconnected from our families.

We're disconnected from community. We're disconnected from our faith. And so this is something that we have been working on before we launched, even prior to our launching, putting the groundwork together. But as we were looking after the pandemic and looking, you know, politically and just seeing that we were more and more disconnected, we had to find within ourselves what are we doing and offering?

Dr. King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, three years ago, when we when we... actually four years, when we conceived of Realize the Dream, we were even saying then that we don't know anyone who has not felt touched by chaos. And this is our blueprint. We feel for building community.

So what we are saying is that we want to bring the nation together with 100 million hours of service collectively by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 100th birthday. So 100 for 100, which is 2029.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you, that's amazing. As I was pondering these hours of service, and of course Martin Luther King Day is a national day of service. One of the two, I learned this in a previous podcast episode. I didn't know that we had two national days of service in our country. Also, 9/11 is a national day of service, and I'm always struck by acts of service that it's a two way exchange.

Yes, we're doing something outward that might change a situation or a circumstance, but the doing of that changes ourselves.

Arndrea Waters King

Actually, it's three ways. We've learned through neuroscience. So it is like you're actively helping someone. So obviously, the person being helped is benefited. You are benefited because you are helping someone. So, there's dopamine and other things are released in your brain and you're getting outside of yourself for helping someone. But what's interesting, as well, is if you witness a good act, an act of kindness, a service, just by seeing it, the person that witnesses it also get a shot of dopamine in their brain.

And think about that when you see something that's positive or someone doing good, you're like, "Oh my goodness", it makes you feel better. You just see it.

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

I appreciate the emphasis that both Martin and Arndrea are placing on the doing so much that we can sometimes be listening to or have great words, and we can make them sound wonderful, but it is in the actualization of that to really doing and carrying out that change happens. And the way that they are describing it right now is just extremely exciting, and that we are hearing what it does, not just for us or the person who we're doing it for and that exchange, but the community as a whole.

And so I really do hope that we are encouraged, all of us, to think about what it is that we can do. And they can be what many might describe as the smallest act and have the largest return. I just thought about, as Arndrea was speaking, even tutoring that one person, who you might help for an hour, they might go on to do something so great in terms of legacy and down the road, that you have no idea how far reaching good acts and

good work can be in helping our community and our relationships to get better. So it's extremely exciting.

Arndrea Waters King

And we would be remiss to be on this podcast and not remind listeners that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last sermon ever was delivered at the Washington Cathedral, as providence would have it, and he talked about the importance of truly creating a true brotherhood and sisterhood. You know, talked about not sleeping through a revolution, the importance of remaining awake.

And this is one way we firmly believe in creating that brotherhood and sisterhood, the instructions that he left, because the last sermon that he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 4th, 1968, literally two months before he was assassinated, was titled the Drum Major Sermon. And in that sermon, he talked about how he wanted to be remembered.

For him, it wasn't important to be remembered for his Nobel Peace Prize, or the many honors that he had, hundreds of honors that he had received, nor even being, at the time, you know, at that point it was called Man of the Year. But he wanted to be remembered.

He wanted his legacy again, which is what we talked about in the book. A legacy is not, you know, leaving your name on a building or on a bench, although that's wonderful. It's a living legacy. What do we do every day? How are we uplifting ourselves and those around us, and how'd he want it to be?

Remember, he was someone who tried to feed the people who had no food, to clothe those that were naked. He wanted to be remembered as living a beautiful life, a life of service. And that's what we feel, that call is our pursuit.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yes. And so I was thinking about, of course, Dr. King preaching his last sermon, and you named the title "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution", and the title, the sermon, it is still so applicable today. And the King family, all generations have had ties to the Cathedral. And so I'm curious, how do we as the Cathedral, and we as individuals, deal with impactful legacies, both publicly and sort of internalize them and make them our own?

Martin Luther King III

So I think that happens. First of all, you have to want to engage, you know, if one does not want to engage, then you will never even think about it. And it's interesting that what we're exposed to, oftentimes represents what we become or do not become. For example, if you're exposed to a lot of negativity, you may go, "I don't want to do that."

"I want to do something positive." And that has to be supported and reinforced, because if whatever is reinforced, whatever one chooses to deposit into the world, you get back. If you deposit negative energy, you're probably going to get negative energy back. But if you start with the intention of being positive, everybody's not going to do that.

But I think we have to create the climate where people want to. I was inspired by teachers when I was a youngster. I mean, obviously later on, any number of people probably wanted to. Greatest influencers in my life beyond my parents was my grandfather, but later on it became Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu, and just so many others in the world.

I was very close to Dick Gregory. So he was good, bad, and indifferent, a wonderful, wonderful human being that inspired me. He did individual protests anywhere in the world, and I believe that we must build community. Not that he didn't. It's just that you said if nobody else is going to do it, I'll do it. I was inspired by that example.

I was inspired by Ambassador Andrew Young from time to time. So I was very fortunate to have many, many mentors. So maybe on one hand you can say, "Well, that's easy for you because of what you saw", but there's so many others in our nation and world who don't necessarily have those examples, yet they make phenomenal contributions, and hopefully we can one day find a way to lift those kinds of individuals up.

We all maybe think that we're supposed to live in the most wholesome and on the straight and narrow, but we as human beings, none of us will ever be perfect. But we can always aspire to be better and to do better. And so all of this is about connectivity. That is what we must do. Because when we are connected, and it's that old simple phrase, when you know better, you do better.

Arndrea Waters King

What I will say, in particular, as relates to the Cathedral, we and Martin, in particular, probably not a week goes by that he's not asked, "Well, what would your father think about what's going on? Where are we in the world?" And I think that the Cathedral has a

very unique and powerful voice in that. And I think that it was something that obviously was ordained by God. I think, though, when you think about remaining awake through a great revolution, if you really just pause and think about how that was the last time that Martin Luther King Jr. prepared a Sunday sermon. It is a glimpse into history, which actually turned out to be a closing statement, if you will, from the pulpit. And I would invite anyone to go back and listen, to listen to that sermon.

And I mean this with true humility. Martin... my Martin, his father, Dr. King, and our daughter Yolanda, who is the only grandchild of Martin and Coretta King, have all spoken from the Canterbury pulpit.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And we have links to them on our website.

Arndrea Waters King

And I believe that we're the only family that can say that about three direct generations that have spoken from that pulpit. And so I would also encourage listeners to start with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermon and then go into listening to his son, Martin Luther King III's sermon, and then finish with his young granddaughter's sermon to young people.

In those sermons, we will find a lot of blueprints, both for the Cathedral as an institution, and as the light bearer, if you will, carrying the torch and the light of faith for our nation, as well as inspiration from a moral standpoint of what Martin Luther King, Jr. believed, and his closing statement to all of us, and Martin and his granddaughter continuing to make relevant and interpreting their own vision of where we all should go.

I really believe that the listeners will find, hopefully, a lot of inspiration and direction and those sermons.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I certainly have. Going back and listening to them recently, I certainly have myself. We like to close our episodes by asking our guests to give us a word of hope. And so in thinking about legacy and thinking about realizing Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream in the world for ourselves today in ever new and changing ways, what is a word of hope that all three of you could give us?

Martin Luther King III

I often share one of dad's most profound quotes, because I embrace it, and I think many of us do almost every day, but certainly every week. And what he said to us was, "The ultimate measure of a human being is not where you stand in times of comfort and convenience, but where you stand in times of challenge and controversy."

He went on to say that on some questions, cowardice ask - is position safe? Expediency ask - is a position political? Vanity ask - is a position popular? But that something called conscience, which exists in all of us, in our hearts, conscience ask - is a position right? Sometimes he said, "We must do things that are neither safe, nor popular, nor political, but we must do them because our audiences tell us they are right."

And so, I say, let your conscience be your guide. True engagement and understanding can be very lifting. And we listen with our ears, but we hear with our heart.

Arndrea Waters King

And I am going to take the liberty of going through two things that are constantly my North stars, particularly, I think now more than ever. And the first is one of my favorite quotes by Mahatma Gandhi, who as we're going through the history of nonviolence, and, you know, that's where Martin Luther King Jr. got a lot of his inspiration from.

And that quote goes, "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it always."

And the second is from Dr. King's... the last Christmas sermon that he ever gave in 1967 in Atlanta at Ebenezer Baptist Church. In that sermon, he says, "I still have a dream because you can't give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving. You lose that courage to be. That quality that helps you go on in spite of it all. And so today, I still have a dream."

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

You know, hearing these quotes, as well as thinking about the moment that we're in, you paused and had me to think about probably a quote from, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said years ago, "There's a realm of time where the goal is not to have, but to be. Not to own, but to give. Not to control, but to share. Not to subdue, but to be in accord."

“Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things, of space, become our sole concern.” I do believe that change is possible and hold to that. And I encourage everyone to think about, not only what they've heard, perhaps in this conversation, but to what they're seeing around them. I've always wrestled with that we are to be, as I've heard it said, timely and timeless, that there are certain things that will move from generation to generation, and we are to be timeless in and to look far out.

But we often struggle touching the generation that we're living in and to be timely. That is the struggle of everyone. And so through what has been raised with Realize the Dream, this conversation, looking back, I think we're being challenged to do both of those, to live at the intersection and to touch the intersection. And I'm excited about that.

If we do what needs to be done now, being timely, we'll be able to have and make an impact on the timeless values that we want to see in our community.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank all three of you for these wonderful words of hope. And it is these words, the words that can bury deep within us, that sustain us when times are hard, and to give us the hope when things do feel hopeless. Because from our Christian tradition, Jesus says there is always hope. There is always new life and resurrection is coming. So thank you.

Martin Luther King III

Thank you, thank you, and thank you all.

Arndrea Waters King

Thank you very much.

The Rev. Canon Leonard Hamlin, Sr.

Yes indeed.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

It was an honor to sit down with Martin, Arndrea, and Leonard to talk about the ways in which Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream has persisted, and how we can all be involved in helping to realize it. I'm thankful, especially for Martin's reminder that everyone of us has a legacy, and we can all do something today to bring that legacy to life and to make the world a better place.

On our next episode, I am delighted to welcome John Philip Newell, spiritual teacher and writer through the Earth & Soul Initiative. Newell teaches throughout the US, and he will be leading a retreat here at the Cathedral in May. He joins us to share wisdom from his two most recent books, *Sacred Earth*, *Sacred Soul* and *The Great Search*. Thank you for listening to Crossroads, and until next time, peace be with you.

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