

Like the Emancipation Proclamation, I had never actually read the entire "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Until now, I was unaware that the genesis of the letter was Dr. King rebuking his religious colleagues. Reading several passages for the first time gave me a deeper understanding of Dr. King's values. He had a strong dislike for hypocrisy, both in others and within himself, and expressed clear dissatisfaction with procrastination. Many of his religious peers objected to civil rights activists breaking laws by actions such as sitting at segregated counters or drinking from segregated

water fountains. Dr. King's powerful response was, “an unjust law is no law.”

This statement immediately brought to mind the reality of businesses lawfully refusing services to certain citizens. I was reminded of my travels through South Carolina and Georgia during my honeymoon, wondering if two men wearing matching wedding rings would face resistance. Fortunately, we did not. However, the existence of such laws in our country has directly impacted my daughter's safety and mental well-being, especially amid the hysteria over forcing transgender

Americans to use restrooms corresponding to their gender at birth. My daughter is six feet tall, slender as a rail with great cheekbone, fabulous skin, big, beautiful eyes and naturally long lashes. I can only imagine the harassment she might endure if she were forced to enter a men's restroom. This concept terrifies her, and through her experiences, I am beginning to understand how truly terrified my mother must have been when she found seven-year-old me having a Coke at the Greyhound Terminal café in 1965, segregated Richmond, Virginia. These laws were and are real.

Similarly, can you imagine the reaction if my extremely muscular, soldier ex-chorus mate, who now sports a full beard and mustache, walked into a ladies' room. The reality is that we all have family, friends, and coworkers who break these kinds of laws every day. These laws make no practical sense and serve only to make people feel less than.

Another passage from Dr. King's letter that resonated with me was his statement, "Justice delayed is justice denied." Dr. King's religious colleagues urged him and his followers to be patient, but history shows the

consequences of delayed justice. The Emancipation Proclamation took two years to be only partially enforced. At that time, Mississippi and South Carolina had majority African American populations. While the Union Army occupied those states, formerly enslaved men were allowed to vote, resulting in Mississippi having two African American United States Senators and a Congressman, and South Carolina being represented by seven Congressmen of African descent.

Ironically, by 1965 when the Voting Rights Act was passed, Mississippi and

South Carolina had absolutely no African American representation in Washington, D.C., even though African American men and women could legally vote. The lack of federal enforcement allowed local governments to use violence and intimidation to discourage the majority population from voting or to force them to migrate north. Mississippi has not had a U.S. Senator of color since 1886 and, as of 2026, has only one U.S. Congressperson of color. South Carolina elected its first U.S. Senator of color in 2013, Tim Scott a Trump supporter, and currently has one

Congressperson of color. This legacy explains why my southern relatives were less enthusiastic about voting and politics compared to those in the north; years of segregationist and Jim Crow laws successfully broke the tradition of generational voting.

Today, we are living in a time when federal representatives are publicly calling for the abolition of women's right to vote. Our national government is erasing the achievements of African, Hispanic, Asian, Latino, Muslim, LGBTQ, Indigenous, and female Americans from the nation's history. The President believes he can order

the military to follow any command he gives and threatens members of Congress and the Senate with execution. We now face two urgent questions: How willing are we to break an unjust law to save our democracy? And how willing are we to force justice forward so that it cannot be denied?

Like Dr. King, I have an unwavering faith in the promise of justice. My belief is rooted in the conviction that nonviolent tension—deliberately created through peaceful protest and civil disobedience—can serve as a powerful catalyst for meaningful change. This approach, championed

by Dr. King, demonstrates that progress is possible even in the face of great resistance.

We must also recall that the very foundation of our nation is built upon the principle that sovereignty lies with its citizens. The phrase “we the people,” the opening words of our Constitution, signifies that the legitimacy of our government is derived from the will and collective action of its people. Although the Constitution is not without its imperfections, it was conceived with the intention of establishing a

government accountable to those it serves.

Dr. King's legacy is evident in his willingness to challenge not only his adversaries but also his peers. He confronted his colleagues in the pursuit of justice, advocating for the inclusion of Americans of African descent in the ongoing project of building a more perfect union, establishing justice and securing peace for future generations.

Na iwe hivyo. Amen.

Benediction

Nellson: As we observe the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, let us remember that Rosa Parks broke the law. May we find the courage to do what is just over what is law.

Ann: And may we continue to tear down our own windows of oppression And bring his vision of “positive peace” into world.