

# Glimpses of the Kingdom

*Martin Luther King Day--Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

Imagine this for a moment: It is the Christmas shopping season. You are the parent of a little seven-year-old girl who has decided that her heart's desire for Christmas is to have a certain kind of doll. They are very special and expensive dolls, designed to look and feel just like real babies. Well, you love this child, and you have the financial means to fulfill this wish, so you take her down to the local toy store. It's a fancy store, and inside, the sellers of this doll have set up an "adoption center" where a "nurse" invites you and the child to look into all the isolettes, choose a baby, and then go through an "adoption process" of answering questions, naming the baby, paying the "adoption fee," and receiving a "birth certificate." Unfortunately, however, the store has run out of Caucasian baby dolls. There are Asian babies, Hispanic babies, black babies, but no babies that look like they could belong to your daughter in the biological sense. You know this is all just for make-believe, and it is an *adoption* anyway. But still...these dolls are not cheap, and while you hadn't really given this any thought before, you realize that in your mind's eye you *had* imagined a white baby. Well, you're a white person, so it stands to reason. But now, what do you do? Do you spend all that money for a baby that isn't quite everything that you had in mind?

Now let me tell the story from the point of view of the "nurse" who was actually hired to sell these dolls at FAO Schwartz in New York City. (And here I must give a shout-out to the radio show *This American Life* for broadcasting this incredible material.<sup>[1]</sup>) Here's what happened. Because of a widely televised, reality-show adoption of one of these special dolls, they became *the* hot item. Every parent on the ritzy upper east side wanted one for his or her daughter. Within a week the white babies had sold out of the store and gone on back-order from the factory until mid-January. Mothers would come in with their little girls, survey what was on display, ask as delicately as possible if there were any other "shades of babies," any babies that "looked like" their daughters, and then float away in disappointment. Well, gradually, slowly, the store did start selling its minority

babies. First the Asian babies went, then the Hispanic babies, until all that was left were rows and rows of black babies and this one white baby that had been badly deformed by some kind of mistake in the factory process. His fingers were melded together into flipper-like hands and his head was too heavy, so that it flopped over in a gruesome, dead-baby way. The employees named this factory reject "Nubbins" and took bets on which would get sold first: Nubbins or the black babies. Guess who won the bet.

You see, as white people, we live this story out from the point of view of one of those mothers, and whether or not we'd do what she did, we at least have some understanding of it. Hers is a pretty straightforward, individual experience: no white babies in stock, the babies cost a lot of money, so on balance she'll pass on getting one. However, we live the story out from the point of view of the employee, and we see something much scarier, much more disturbing. We see a pattern, into which all those individual mothers' choices fit. And in that pattern, we see the veil lifted on racism as it lives and breathes in America today.

Now our first temptation might be to distance ourselves from it. We might reach for some way in which those women aren't like us at all: because they are rich, or New Yorkers, or hypocritical liberals, or whatever other label might apply. If we are honest, though, we will admit that the truth is more threatening than that.

It is, in fact, the same truth to which Martin Luther King tried to hold the white church accountable in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"<sup>[ii]</sup> portions of which we read today. To give you a little context, King wrote the letter in response to a statement that the white clergy of Birmingham had published in the newspaper, claiming that they were sympathetic to some of the civil rights movement's aims but listing raising a number of very "reasonable" objections to King's tactics. Racial grievances should be addressed between local white and black leaders and not by outside agitators like King. The courts, and not the streets, were the proper place to take justice issues that persisted. Good work was already being done through these proper channels and should not be threatened by illegal demonstrations. The Episcopal Bishop of Alabama was one of the signers, along with a Rabbi and clergy from the Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic denominations. And what disturbs me is the distinct likelihood that I would have been one of the

signers myself, had I grown up white in the south at that time. The statement is so measured and high-minded, so reasonable. It's not much of a stretch at all to imagine signing it. Or even, God-help-me, drafting it.

But King called those clergy to account for hiding their complicity in racism behind the language of responsibility and maintenance of the public peace and proper channels. He saw and articulated about them what the FAO Schwartz employee saw and articulated about those New York mothers. And he reminded the clergy that the church's call is not to be an "irrelevant social club" giving "sanction to things as they are" but a voice for the downtrodden and the abused, an advocate for the coming of God's kingdom of equality, justice, and love among people of all colors.

My brothers and sisters, we stand today on the eve of an historic moment: the inauguration of Barack Obama, America's first black president, elected by an indisputable majority in a country that is still overwhelmingly white. And the irony of the baby doll adoption story I told earlier is that, statistically, many if not most of those mothers voted for Obama. Many if not most of them were willing to place a black man in the highest office in the land, even while they refused to place a black baby doll in the arms of their own daughters. So the *fact* of Obama's election--let me be clear here: not the party or political philosophy he espouses, with which Christians may authentically differ, but the non-partisan, historical *fact* that we've elected a black president--offers us a glimpse of that kingdom of God, that kingdom of equality, towards which Dr. King led us. And yet, at the same time, the *fact* of that store full of unwanted black baby dolls, shunned by some of the very voters who helped to elect Obama, offers a glimpse of how distant that kingdom of God remains. It's a paradox. It announces both how far we've traveled since King's time and how far we have still to travel. It announces both the work we have done, and the work we have yet to do in overcoming the sin of racism in our land and in our own hearts.

So King's letter to those white clergy, this Letter from a Birmingham Jail, still has a profound relevance to us, here, today, in this overwhelmingly white church. It asks us questions with which we *must* grapple. How can we be a church that is not simply an "irrelevant social club" giving "sanction to things as they are"? How can we be a church that is not merely a "thermometer" of "popular opinion" but rather a "thermostat" to "transform the mores of society" in honor of Martin

Luther King, and in the name of Jesus Christ.

[i] This example, and its quotations, come from National Public Radio, *This American Life*, "Episode #347: Matchmakers," broadcast on the weekend of January 9, 2009 and downloaded at [www.thisamericanlife.org/radio\\_archive.aspx](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio_archive.aspx).

[ii] Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" referenced and quoted in this sermon may be accessed at [www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).