Zackary B. Odom

King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is one of the most elegant writings that I have ever read in my life. Of course this isn't my first time reading this magnificent piece of our history. However, every time I read it, I become more aware of the struggle that many had to endure in order to create a more “perfect union,” as President Lincoln would say. It also reminds me that, unfortunately, the pages and words of this letter are still relevant today. It has been almost fifty years since Dr. King was assassinated. I’m sure many would agree that our country has come a long way when it comes to race relations. However, I believe that we still have a long way to go. Due to recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, the words of Dr. King still ring with truth. Dr. King’s white moderates are now people who choose to remain silent rather than condemn bigotry and hatred. Dr. King’s disappointment with the church is in today’s time the inaction of our government to fight destitution and deficiency. Dr. King beseeched others to act now, as we should now inspire our fellow citizens to become more involved in our political system.

Charlottesville showed us recently that racism and bigotry are alive and well in our country. So much so, that it is very possible fanaticism may reside within the walls of our very own White House. It’s disturbing that our President finds there to be a moral equivalence of people fighting against the ideologies of hate and those who promote it. Today’s political climate and the divide that we are experiencing perhaps resembles in some way the divide that may have existed during the time Dr. King wrote this letter from Birmingham Jail. Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation, we are still experiencing the stringent effects of racism;
whether it’s poverty, a broken criminal justice system, defective education system, or massive wealth inequality, we still have a fight that must be fought with the tenacity and determination that Dr. King demonstrated. We must realize as Americans that for too long we have stood idly by and allowed injustices such as a Supreme Court decision like Citizens United or the bailout of major companies, which caused the worst economic crisis that we have seen since the Great Depression, are injustices that are an assault on our Democracy. Dr. King stated that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We can no longer tolerate silence or conformity to the ideas of racism, bigotry, injustice, and corruption.

Dr. King’s disappointment with the church and their unwillingness to act and stand up to such a perverted ideology resonates today with the inaction and dysfunction of our own government. No longer do our elected representatives act in the welfare of the common citizen, but instead act on behalf of corporate interest. As Dr. King states, “Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” This should reveal to us as Americans that we must stand up and demand that our democracy represent the majority, not the small minority of opulence and greed. We must use the most valuable tool that Dr. King gave us, which is non-violent direct action. We can stand together and raise our voices and say that we do not want to build wasteful walls of intolerance or deport 800,000 young people who have only known one home in America. But instead we must gather together to fix our broken health care system, make sure that children have accessibility to adequate education, and stand against xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and sexist ideologies that have plagued our society for far too long.

Before we can make this a reality we must persuade and urge our fellow countrymen and women to stand together and become involved in our democracy. Just as Dr. King urged white
moderates to join the fight against segregation, we must urge our fellow citizens to act as well. If we do not stand and take a side, ideologies like white supremacy and xenophobia will grow and continue to spread this vile cancer in our country. Racism is even more prominent today because of the regime of Donald Trump and his inability to condemn white supremacists and neo-Nazis. That is why it is so critical that we collectively stand against such ideologies and fight for the legacy of Dr. King. These kinds of ideas give fuel to the fire of injustice and inequality. Dr. King stated that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

In conclusion, obviously Dr. King’s words rings truth today. I wish that I could say that Dr. King’s letter isn't relevant today; however, that isn't the case. Dr. King knew the importance of standing up and fighting the immoral ideas that threaten this great idea which we call America. Of course, we should be very proud of the legacy of Dr. King, but most importantly we should fight to keep his dream alive. We can do this by fighting against those who don't condemn the ideology of racism, demand that our government act and fight on behalf of the majority not the minority, and our fellow citizens become more involved in our political process. By doing so, we can keep the dream of equality alive for all, not just the few, and keep the dream of a strong united America alive.
Work Cited

King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” 16 April 1963. Archived by the Center for Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania,

www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.