

**After-dinner Remarks
for the Annual Remembrance Dinner
Scottish Rite Temple, Charleston, WV
April 8, 2008**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

Let me begin by thanking you all, and especially my friend Gary Frame, for asking me to speak to you this evening. My wife Gail and I both appreciate being here to share this occasion with you.

I find myself, at the ripe old age of sixty-three, looking to all the world as if I had been an Episcopal priest for most of my life. In fact, I was ordained priest only in June of last year, unable to put off any longer that which I was called to do and to be. Unlike a younger man, I did not go off to seminary, but instead was trained here in West Virginia.

One of the things I have been told is that my “life experience” counts for something in learning to be a useful priest, and I have been interested to learn that is true. And so, as I think with you about those persons we remember tonight, perhaps I can draw on some of the lessons of my life, with just a bit of the priest thrown in for good measure!

This past week has been one in which the nation was focused on the events of forty years ago when Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, was assassinated in Memphis. As I think of Doctor King and his courage in facing his fellow Americans with the truth of the evils of segregation and racism, I know that he is a man who deserves to be remembered.

We remember Doctor King as a man with a message for the ages, yet we would be less than honest to say that – in his lifetime – he was universally admired. Obviously, the man who pulled the trigger of his rifle had no admiration for Martin Luther King, Junior.

My memories this past week of those events of forty years ago have led me to understand – in a way I did not appreciate at the time – that Doctor King was a man of faith, who lived and died for that faith. His last sermon was preached in the Episcopal cathedral in Washington, D C. Our church has added his name to the list of those to be remembered in our prayers.

The preface to Lesser Feasts and Fasts, the book which now includes prayers for Martin Luther King, Junior, says: “Christians have since ancient times honored men and women whose lives represent heroic commitment to Christ and who have borne witness to their faith even at the cost of their lives.”¹

It goes on to say, “In the saints we are not dealing primarily with absolutes of perfection but human lives, in all their diversity, open to the motions of the Holy Spirit. Many a holy life, when carefully examined, will reveal flaws or the bias of a particular moment in history... . What in one age was taken as virtue may at another time seem misguided. It should encourage us to realize that the saints, like us, are first and foremost redeemed sinners.”

In short, we are all imperfect. And yet some of us are worthy of remembrance.

¹ Preface to Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006, p v-vi.

Some people will tell you of Doctor King's imperfections. Many people objected to the creation of a holiday for him across our nation. I dare say some today still see it as an unnecessary gesture.

It is not unnecessary, of course. Great wrongs can be righted only by facing them, and remembering them in public is a necessary step in that process.

But we are here tonight to remember people for whom there will be no national holiday. Your annual commemoration of those masons who have departed this life, is a valuable and meaningful tribute to persons who were your colleagues and your friends.

It turns out, you see, that the really important persons in our lives, the ones to whom we turn for advice, or counsel, or companionship, are our friends and neighbors. Famous people are important to our nation, but for the most part, we didn't know the famous. The people we know are – ordinary. Like us.

I can remember people who were, and are, important to me, but the world does not know or remember them, nor will it. But their lack of prominence does not make them less worthy of being remembered.

Bessie Lobban ran a ladies ready-to-wear shop in Mount Hope more than fifty years ago. She sewed the altar hangings for our church in Oak Hill, and she used to embroider my initials into handkerchiefs as gifts for me. She once gave my brother a Nancy Drew mystery – which confused Dave. Bessie was a contemporary of my grandparents. She was a widow who didn't have much in the way of money, and who was defrauded of that which she had by a supposed friend.

But in all her life, she never gave up, never gave in to pity. Bessie Lobban is not in any book of prayers, but she is one of the saints of God. She is remembered in a stained glass window in her church in Oak Hill – sewing the altar hangings.

Jenny Lawson was the daughter of slaves, a woman whose husband had the job of running the hoist, the cable car that went over the hill at the Kaymoor Number Two mine outside Fayetteville. For the most part, Jenny actually ran the thing – and I have ridden in it, a frightening ride, bereft of all safety devices, but the way into and out of Kaymoor in the New River Gorge.

Jenny was also my mother's maid, and as my brother says, Jenny raised the two of us. There was a lot about that relationship I didn't understand or appreciate at the time, but which now shines with the light of blessing in my mind.

I remember being asked by Jenny to read a letter to her. It was hand-written, and she explained "I can read reading, but I can't read writing." Jenny devoted herself to others all of her life, especially to her own children, all of whom have master's degrees – a remarkable achievement for one who could not read writing.

In time, she retired and collected Social Security, which had been paid by my father. When I came back to Fayetteville, a visit with Jenny was a much-anticipated pleasure. Jenny Lawson lived all of her life in a segregated community, and when she died, she was the first person of color to be buried in Huse Memorial Park. You can visit her grave at the foot of the cross in the front of the cemetery.

Jenny Lawson is worthy of remembrance.

The list could go on and on, but I think you get the point. I remember these people because they were special to me, and I remember the good in them and about them. They are people I can tell my children about, and Bessie and Jenny live on, and now they can live in your hearts and minds.

That is the nature of remembering. It is that way today, and it has been that way for all of the generations of mankind. If you turn in your Bible to the

apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus, you will find something called the “Hymn in Honor of our Ancestors.” I’d like to read that as an appropriate ending to these remarks. A reading from the forty-fourth chapter of Ecclesiasticus.

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations.

²The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning.

³There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles;

⁴those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people’s lore; they were wise in their words of instruction;

⁵those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing;

⁶rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes—

⁷all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times.

⁸Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise.

⁹But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.

¹⁰But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;

¹¹their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children’s children.

¹²Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake.

¹³Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out.

¹⁴Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation.

¹⁵The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise. ²

Thank you.

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Sir 44:1-15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.