

“King Still Speaks in Iowa”
January 18, 2026

Micah 2:6-7, 11
Romans 12:2, 9-21

Late last year I was already thinking about our worship service and the sermon for this Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. And as I often had in the past, I turned to the University of Iowa to learn about the theme for their annual Martin Luther King Celebration of Human Rights Week. In past years I’ve used their theme to provide some direction for our worship and I’ve used their graphics on the bulletin covers. It was a good way to connect us to the larger community around us.

The website said more information would be coming closer to the event. Check back later.

I would. But just to stay ahead of the game I also sent an email asking about the upcoming theme.

I waited, but never received a reply.

So early this year, with time growing short, I checked the website again. The information about last year’s events was there. An archive of the wonderful student artwork for the Celebration of Human Rights Week over many years was there.

But nothing about this year.

A few days later, I checked back again. The website had been taken down—no events, no artwork. Nothing.

Now, our good neighbors at the University of Iowa had a long tradition of starting the second semester of classes by *not holding* classes. The semester begins on the third Monday in January, which, of course is also the day when we as nation mark the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That day used to be the beginning of the annual week-long Celebration of Human Rights. Students, faculty, and staff were urged to make this a “day on” rather than a day off, by participating in activities in our community: contribute to a food drive, serve at the Free Lunch Program, volunteer at Crowded Closet—good activities and the kind of things we at the Congregational Church do throughout the year.

It was a point of pride—not only for the University but for our whole community—that the recognition of King’s birthday had been a tradition at the University of Iowa since 1969, and that the national holiday had been observed through human rights programs since its inception in 1986.

As far as I can tell, aside from the day off from classes, nothing else is happening this year.

There *will* be a King Day lecture at the Law School a week from this Tuesday. The title is “The Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Today’s University Campus.” Judging by *this* week at *this* university, one might ask: “What legacy?”

I don’t know for sure. But it seems that the Board of Regent’s concerns about controversial topics on campus have had a chilling effect. And no doubt, the assault on our nation’s

universities coming from Washington played a part. King was certainly controversial, so maybe it's best to just stay silent. And it seems that celebrating human rights—and caring for one's neighbors and one's community—could be a little too divisive.

Out on the streets the voices cry: “No Kings!”

From the University that surrounds us cautious voices whimper: “No King.”

Here in this sanctuary, we *do* remember and give thanks for King's life and ministry. We remember that he challenged those of us who call ourselves “Christian” to actually live as followers of Jesus Christ. We recognize that his life and his actions and his words still have a power to trouble great institutions as well as our individual souls and the soul of our nation.

We call King a prophet. And he was—one who tells forth the word of God, speaking words of challenge in difficult times. And he was often met with a prophet's response.

The well-off people said to the prophet, Micah: “Do not preach! One should not preach such things.”

King spoke of the equality of all people. He called on the United States to fulfill its promise of that equality. And people said: “Do not preach! One should not preach such things.”

King spoke of the destructive catastrophe that was the Viet Nam war. And people—even people in the civil rights movement—said: “Do not preach! One should not preach such things.”

The night before his assassination, King spoke of economic equality, telling striking sanitation workers: “We've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end.” And people said: “Do not preach! One should not preach such things.”

So, in a sense, we shouldn't be surprised when a major university seeks to silence King's voice, seeks to scrub his memory. Perhaps the UI is simply showing us just how radical, how subversive, King was. His message was much more challenging than one speech about dreams that we teach school children. His message called into question our nation and our lives. And it continues to do so today.

This year, then, let us remember that time in 1959 when King's voice echoed through the halls of the IMU Ballroom down the hill from us.

Speaking to a full house, King spoke of the struggle for voting rights. He spoke of what he called “the folkways of white supremacy,” affirming that the opponents of desegregation are fighting a losing battle.

And I don't know that he was pointing up the hill when he made his oft quoted comment that “The most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning,” but those words still convict.

It is always hard to listen to King without shouting: “Do not preach! One should not preach these things.”

King ended his speech with one of the earliest instances that I can find of calling his audience to be “maladjusted”—to not adjust to the evils of segregation.

Over the coming years, in his speeches at universities, King often told students, faculty, and staff:

“I never did intend to adjust to the evils of segregation and discrimination,” he said. “I never did intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I never did intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many and give luxuries to the few. I never did intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And I call upon all [people] of goodwill to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.”

Those words could have been spoken this past week. Segregation and discrimination, religious bigotry, economic inequality, the madness of militarism, and physical violence roam our county undeterred—the sin that finds its salvation in the maladjusted.

“Do not preach!” some would say. “One should not preach such things.”

And yet, is not King’s call to be maladjusted an echo of Paul’s words that we heard this morning: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

We should not adjust ourselves to an economic order that makes the grinding reality of hunger and poverty a growing reality. We should intend to put an end to the hunger, poverty, and homeless in our midst. We should be maladjusted enough to seek justice.

We should not adjust ourselves to the growing calls of racial bigotry and bias, the new promotion of white supremacy coming from the highest halls of power in our nation. We should not adjust ourselves to the homophobia that remains rampant in so many places in our nation and the world. We should not adjust ourselves to the ongoing oppression of women and the exploitation of children around the globe. We should be maladjusted enough to pursue the equality that respects all people as God’s creations.

We should not adjust ourselves to the kind of thinking that tells us it’s who you know or what you know, it’s what you have done or haven’t done, it’s how much money you have or don’t have, it’s where you came from or how you got here that establishes your worth as a person. The new life in Christ that God makes possible is one in which the value of each individual human being—of you and me, of neighbors and the strangers who walk by or through our doors—the value of each human being is grounded in the reality that we are the children of God. We should be maladjusted enough to be welcoming people.

We are called, King said, to “be as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could look into the eyes of the men and women of his generation and cry out, ‘Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Pray for them that spitefully use you.’”

Following in the way of Jesus Christ is not about adapting and adjusting. When we act with such courage in the face of all that destroys, it is not easy. By God’s grace, we find ourselves faithful enough and maladjusted enough to choose the way that leads to life.

Do not be conformed, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

The University might try to silence him through neglect or lack of programing; it might try to silence him out of fear or from a mistaken sense of self preservation. But King still speaks in Iowa. Even if others will not listen, let us listen and let us live as those who have heard. Let us be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

So, as a new semester begins, it is important for the students and faculty among us—and really, for *all* of us—to think again about education and the aims and goals of the great university that surrounds us. Let me remind all of you maladjusted people of what King wrote while still a student at Morehouse College back in 1947: “Intelligence *plus* character—that is the goal of a true education.”

“Intelligence *plus* character—that is the goal of a true education.” That is the renewing of our minds.

King suggested that: “The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.”

Any number of people might come to mind that fit this description.

“Intelligence is not enough,” King concluded. “Intelligence *plus* character—that is the goal of true education.”

The hours, the years in the classroom, in the library, in the lab, in the practice room, in the studio are meant to produce something—and something beyond scholarly work or a great performance. There is much more at stake—the development of character, even *maladjusted* character, that is needed for these days of tumult.

Once again, I remind you: we in the liberal church are called to important work. We used to assume—possibly with some justification—that many outside the church, including our neighbors at the University held our values and expectations. We are now called to define and clarify what our values are and learn to speak about them in ways that can persuade others. Following in the way of Jesus Christ, we recognize the intrinsic worth of each individual, in whom we see the image of God. Out of this, we honor and seek to protect human dignity and human rights. We seek to create a culture of tolerance, solidarity, and the equal enjoyment of individual rights in our city, state, and nation.

King still speaks in Iowa. Let us listen.

King still speaks in Iowa. Let us not adjust, let us not conform.

King still speaks in Iowa. Let our minds be renewed that we, the maladjusted, might be those who, even now, bring the wholeness, the salvation of God into the world.