

Maeve Florence-Smith
Mrs. Hiner
11th grade Wooster High School

Martin Luther King and Economic Inequality in America

“What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?” Martin Luther King’s words here emphasize that, in the battle for equal rights, it is not enough to overthrow Jim Crow laws; those undertaking the non-violent fight also need to advocate for economic equity. King’s passion for economic equal rights led him to go to Memphis to show support for the sanitation workers who were on strike there. It was a noble action, but it took him to the place where he was assassinated. Nevertheless, I think that his decision to go to Memphis was a good one. It was important for him to address the strike because of the horrible events that had led up to it—even more so because a significant principle was at stake, and his actions brought more attention to the problem of poverty, which remains an urgent issue for us in America today.

Several circumstances led to the strike in Memphis, Tennessee. First, all the sanitation workers were suffering under horrible conditions. According to Ted Conover of *Smithsonian Magazine*, “The Number 3 tubs would often leak onto their shoulders; people didn’t use plastic bags in those days. The workers had no uniforms and no place to wash up after work” (*Smithsonian Magazine* January 2018). Secondly, the employees were making wages below the standard of living; they made one dollar per hour of work (Conover, *Smithsonian Magazine* January 2018). Thirdly, African-American sanitation workers, in particular, were experiencing discrimination that put them at greater risk. For example, the sanitation trucks had crews of four to five, but only white employees could drive the trucks. So African-Americans had the more dangerous job of getting out and collecting the trash—and one crewman lost his leg when a car

crashed into the back of the truck (Conover, *Smithsonian Magazine* January 2018). Fourthly, a major incident rallied people to strike: in 1968 when two sanitation workers were looking for a place to stay dry in the rain, they were accidentally crushed in the back of a sanitation truck because of a faulty switch. As a result of these deaths, their colleagues organized the initial strike.

Although the workers had gone on strike previously, their strikes received little public attention. This time was different. In February of 1968, Henry Loeb, the city's mayor, would not work with the sanitation employee representatives and he vetoed their pay raise, even though it had been passed by the city council. So, 150 local ministers came together for a non-violent march; however, these non-violent marchers were sprayed with mace and tear gassed. As a result, King came and gave a speech to around 15,000 people and then returned ten days later as the leader of a protest. The protesters, however, became unruly; stores were ransacked, and police killed a 16-year-old boy. The police then drove the protesters to a church, tear gassed them and beat them while they lay on the ground trying to get air. These brutal events demonstrated the need for equality in the time of 1968.

Even before King's fatal yet important decision to go to Memphis, the topic of equal rights was incredibly important to him because of the extreme prejudice his family and friends faced just for the color of their skin. Hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan were lynching people. Hate crimes were occurring: only five years before, on September 15, 1963, the bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama killed four young girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair. King led non-violent protests, and he was jailed 29 times. During protests, he was gassed, sprayed with mace, beaten, and shot at, all for protesting inhumane treatment. So, when he heard about the treatment of sanitation

workers in Memphis, it would have gone against his message and all he stood for not to try to help.

For King, the strike in Memphis may even have been especially important because of the economic component. He spoke of the economic injustice that came with being a person of color: "One America is flowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality," King said. "...There is another America, and that other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair" (Eugene Robinson, *The Washington Post* January 15, 2015). King and his followers were fighting against this ugliness, because they strongly believed that everyone should have the opportunity for financial stability.

The prejudice that occurred back then is still present today. In the book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates tells us, "All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* 2015). Racism is felt upon the body. And part of that bodily harm is the blow of economic injustice. According to P.R. Lockhart, black women right now must work 20 months to match a white man's salary for 12 months. Black women working a full-time year-round job make 63 cents to the white male dollar. The problem affects other women: Latinas and Native American women make 54 and 57 cents respectively per white male dollar (Lockhart, "Tuesday is Black Women's Equal Pay Day," *Vox* August 7, 2018). It is also noteworthy that, in the United States, African Americans are the most at risk to lack health insurance (Heather Long, *The Washington Post*

September 15, 2017). As Sarah Jones has recently written, homes in neighborhoods that are a majority African American are undervalued by an average of \$48,000.00 (Jones, *New York Magazine* November 29, 2018). These are examples of the economic inequities that African Americans face. From daily pay to an undervalued living environment, these blows contribute to the physical experience of racism in America.

I believe that it was important for Martin Luther King to go to Memphis and continue his public fight for equality. It was important for King to recognize the sanitation workers in Memphis, because it further conveyed his message and it raised public awareness of economic injustices. The work is not done: we must continue the fight for financial stability.