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**'You have to be an ally all of the time'**



*JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier*

The Rev. Ernestine Flemister of St. Luke's Episcopal Church of Grants Pass delivers her keynote speech at Monday evening's annual Grants Pass Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Newman United Methodist Church.

*By Chris Bristol of the Daily Courier*

Patience is not a virtue when it comes to ending injustice, the Rev. Ernestine Flemister told an audience Monday on the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 95th birthday.

In his day, King fought not only against segregation and other forms of racial injustice but also against poverty and the expanding war in Vietnam, said Flemister, keynote speaker for the annual MLK Day celebration at Newman United Methodist Church in downtown Grants Pass.

On this MLK Day, Flemister, rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Grants Pass, did not hold her tongue on topics of concerns of the day, namely immigration, homelessness and gun violence.

An immigrant herself from Liberia in West Africa, Flemister condemned anti-immigrant rhetoric and drew a round of applause when she said, "Without 'those people,' this country would not be what it is today."

In a city that is now the test case for anti-camping laws before the U.S. Supreme Court, she said the homeless are neither evil nor deserving of blame for their circumstances, adding, "It can happen anywhere to anyone."

And of gun violence, she was succinct in her assessment of AK-47s and other military style firearms, calling them "weapons of war."

Flemister's speech capped an event that sought to go beyond simplistic understanding of King as a proponent of non-violent activism and a martyr with a message of peace, love and understanding.

Featuring plenty of music, including a performance by the Community Choir, the annual MLK Day celebration has been hosted by Newman United for years, now in partnership with Bethany Presbyterian Church, Saint Luke's, and Rogue Community College.

Excerpts from King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," penned by King in response to a published critique of his movement by several prominent white clergy members, revealed his impatience for patience.

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," King wrote from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, where he had been arrested in April 1963 for violating a new state law against mass public demonstrations. "Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."

Today, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is best remembered for the line, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," but even a casual reading reveals that a major theme was King's frustration with the lack of ecumenical support in Alabama.

White moderates "devoted to order," he said, were more of an impediment to justice than white supremacists. It was, he added, "a regrettable conclusion."

"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will," he said.

Flemister sounded her full-throated agreement.

"Wait is not a word that is in my vocabulary," she said, urging those in attendance not to "delude" themselves.

"You have to be an ally all of the time," she said, adding, "You're either going to be a good ally or an ally not at all. You need to face that fact."

At the beginning of her speech, Flemister announced she is leaving Grants Pass after six years to take on a larger role as Missioner for Racial Reconciliation at Episcopal Diocese of Oregon headquarters in Portland.

The announcement was received with a groan from the audience, and Flemister circled back to it at the conclusion of her address. "To quote Arnold Schwarzenegger," she said, "I'll be back." The audience responded with a standing ovation.

Jane Slama and John Mackenzie said they were disappointed Flemister is leaving Grants Pass, with Mackenzie saying he noticed the absence of Black people in the community when he moved to Grants Pass in the 1980s. Black people today represent less than 1% of the population.

"It felt literally like a physical void," he said.

Slama, meanwhile, said she hoped there was nothing negative behind Flemister's leaving for Portland, saying, "Because Grants Pass clearly needs her."

In a quick followup, Flemister said she was not being driven away from Grants Pass and that being in Portland puts her just a few hours away from her daughter's family in Tacoma.

"No, no, no," she said, "I would have said something."

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