On August 28, 1963, some 250,000 people marched on Washington, DC. The platform for the speakers and singers program was set up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, looking out on the Reflecting Pond with the Washington Monument in the distance. The thousands and thousands of participants – at the time the largest crowd ever to march on the nation’s capital – showed clearly that a century after the Civil War far too many Americans, especially black Americans, were still deprived of their fundamental rights as citizens. A. Philip Randolph’s call for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom showed the political leaders of America that the time for change was at hand. As Bob Dylan would sing the following year, “The Times They Are a-Changin’” – whether white America was ready or not.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took the stage for remarks listed as item 16 on the official program. Yet his “I Have a Dream” speech is probably what is best remembered from that momentous day. From the moment he began to speak, the crowd was rapt, many chanting in response to his words.

While the refrain of “I have a dream” is what we hear on this 50th anniversary, King made it clear that the struggle was still going to be long and arduous, that the struggle for justice – though fraught with peril – was necessary and that the time for action was
at hand. He noted that the Emancipation Proclamation was already a hundred years past but black Americans were still denied their rights and mired in segregation and poverty. And here we are now – fifty years later. We can still listen to his words, and the power of his message is just as profound now as it was in 1963.

Yet what we see and hear on this 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is a sanitized version of what King and many of the other leaders of the civil rights movement were, of what they stood for. Even in 1963, King was being rejected by those in power who feared the change that he stood for. J. Edgar Hoover had already begun his witch hunt to discredit King as well as other leaders of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. King in particular was one of Hoover’s special targets. Misinformation, disinformation, and downright lies were leaked to the media about King by the FBI. Actual facts were distorted in ways to make him appear immoral and dishonorable. While King was a man with human failings, he was also a man of great intellect and ability and leadership.

What did he stand for? He was a revolutionary in his thinking which evolved over his years as a civil rights activist and leader. In fact, identifying him as a civil rights leader in the context of advocating for the rights of black Americans is a very narrow way of looking at what he stood for. He unambiguously understood the interconnections between freedom, jobs, justice, and peace – the fact that we cannot have one without the others.

King’s activist career began in 1955 when he joined the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama after the arrest of Rosa Parks. In 1957 he organized the Southern Christian
Leadership Conference to fight against segregation and to advocate for the rights of African Americans. Over the following years, his participation in civil rights marches and activities led to his arrest on numerous occasions and to the enmity of J. Edgar Hoover. Even though he was invited to attend the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, he was becoming identified as much too radical by many mainstream politicians – even supporters of civil rights – as well as other civil rights leaders. By 1965, he was focusing on the poor of all colors, leading to the creation of the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967. Perhaps one of his most significant public statements was his “A Time to Break Silence” speech on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City when he declared his opposition to the Vietnam War. In 1968, King called for the Poor People’s Campaign to lead another March on Washington later that year demanding an Economic Bill of Rights guaranteeing jobs for everyone who wanted one and economic assistance for those who could not work and an end to housing discrimination – quite similar to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, of which the U. S. is a signatory. No wonder J. Edgar saw King as not just an “agitator” but more ominously as a “red”! Had King not been assassinated on April 4, 1968, he would not now be revered as he is. He likely would now be considered just another lost soul – a communist or socialist. Unfortunately, death has a way of changing reputations. Just look at how Ronald Reagan is seen now by Republicans – many of whom would never vote for him and his policies now.

It is now fifty years later, and we have seen changes – both positive and negative. We did see an expansion of job opportunities and voting rights. But we still live in one
of the most racially segregated societies in the western world. We recently saw the John Roberts court gut the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In fact, Roberts should take his place in infamy, along with Roger B. Taney, the architect of the 1857 Dred Scott decision which declared that Blacks could not be U.S. citizens and stayed the law of the land until the 14th Amendment in 1868, and Melville Fuller, the chief justice at the time of the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which established the "separate but equal" doctrine, allowing legal segregation and Jim Crow laws to flourish until Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.

Especially since the decision striking down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, on June 25th of this year, efforts to suppress voting rights have been seen in several states including Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Virginia and North Carolina. In fact, North Carolina seems intent on giving those of us who did not live in the 17th century an opportunity to do so. What America does John Roberts live in? Certainly not the America that I do. If he truly believes that the Voting Rights Act is no longer necessary because we are now a post-racial nation, then he needs to leave his gated community and see what life is really like for people of color in America. A recent poll indicates that less than a third of blacks and less than half of whites believe that “a lot” of progress has been made toward equal rights in America over the last half century.

What would King say now if he were still with us? Instead of saying, “I have a dream,” would he now say, “I have a nightmare?” Absolutely NOT.

He would understand the Occupy Movement – the 99% vs. the 1%. He would challenge the mean-spiritedness of the Tea Party – the current version of the White
Citizens Councils and the other segregationists of 50 years ago. He would support the actions of Attorney General Eric Holder in challenging the voter suppression law recently enacted in Texas. He would confront legislators like Ohio State Representative John Becker, who has just proposed legislation in Ohio to cut back the availability of Medicaid to thousands of poor women who are pregnant as well as poor parents and disabled individuals. He wanted to cut back the number of poor children eligible for Medicaid as well, but the State of Ohio cannot do so under federal law. King would have known what to say to Becker and his ilk. How can a man or woman call himself or herself a good human being and advocate such a heartless idea?

So maybe the question is not “What would King say now?” but “What would King ask of us now?” What we are dealing with are moral imperatives, and we cannot expect immoral people to understand that. We must force them to see that their own best interests are served by accepting our moral positions. So King would exhort us to continue sharing his dream. To stand up for our rights. To join together. To fight back against reactionaries and those who would take us back to the darkness of the days of Jim Crow segregation in America. To walk together hand in hand – black and brown and yellow and red and white – down the streets of America in pursuit of his vision of a righteous society.