Moonlight, MLK, and the damage we do to each other

Moonlight is hard to watch—but also essential viewing—because of what it reveals about us as humans.

By Debra Dean Murphy

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There are scenes of such tenderness in Barry Jenkins's exquisite film *Moonlight* that they are almost unbearable to watch. Not because the viewer is made to feel like a voyeur—not remotely—and not because part of the protagonist's story is his struggle to know and name his body's desires. In fact, that way of putting it—that *Moonlight* is a movie about sexual self-discovery—minimizes, I think, both the beautiful sweep of this particular story set in this particular place among these particular people and what it means to know ourselves as desiring beings.

Human intimacy takes many forms and sexual identity is not a term that defines one's personhood in any way that approaches completeness. One of the most breathtaking scenes in the film is when Juan teaches Chiron ("Little") to swim. It, like much of the movie, is bathed in blue light. As A. O. Scott writes in the best review I know of, scenes like this are "better witnessed than described." But one thing that can be said is that in the soft, azure evening light Chiron is given a glimpse—maybe the first—of his belovedness. And Juan, too, who cannot be reduced to stereotype or to any of the tired tropes of lesser films about drug addiction and despair, seems to both reveal and discover his own capacity for selfless love. He *sees* Chiron. And he touches him, cradling him in warm ocean waves, offering him safety and calm for storms yet to come.

And isn't that what we all want? To be seen and known, to feel safe and loved in the presence of another who wants our good? To experience the touch of another, in all its forms, that communicates our belonging and belovedness, whatever awaits us in this world?

This week we remember Martin Luther King Jr. and we inaugurate a new president. In one way, the public liturgies of these two occasions will be similar because neither will be completely honest: most observances of King's legacy will downplay or avoid altogether the radical political theology that got him killed and the personal moral failings that hurt people in his life. And the spectacle of inaugural politics will belie not only a deep divide in our country but a season of unprecedented unkindness and coarseness in which the dignity of many persons—of the vulnerable, especially—was called into question.

In other ways, the juxtaposition of these two events this week couldn't be more startling. Precisely because of what we have witnessed these last many months, the life and work of King stands in solemn judgment on the body politic and the will of an electorate that brought us to this. For what King can teach us in this particular moment is perhaps less about community organizing and nonviolent resistance—though thank God for heirs of the movement like William Barber—and more about what it means to *see*, to behold with unashamed tenderness, the humanity of another.

We have not been willing to regard those around us in such ways, most especially those who are routinely stigmatized, demonized, thrown away. We have been told, falsely, that the first question in staking our claim in political life is "what will you do for me?" instead of "what does my vulnerable neighbor need?" We have been suspicious of and outright hostile to the Black Lives Matter movement because we've never seriously reckoned with white privilege and the kind of racism that does the most harm: deeply entrenched patterns of discrimination and exclusion in all institutions of American life.

And then a small, quiet movie is made. (But not without the help of white privilege in Hollywood.) And we see the matter of many black lives—the material conditions that leave black bodies and souls black and blue, bruised in spirit, confronting injustices and indignities that would break us in a minute and that often do break these fragile sisters and brothers we don't (want to) see or know.

Part of what makes *Moonlight* hard to watch—while at the same time being absolutely urgent and essential viewing—is what it reveals about ourselves. When Chiron is grown and is able, despite his fears, to make a faltering gesture toward connection and communion, he acknowledges his desire in all its complexity, his humanity in all its fullness. And he is received with a grace rarely witnessed on film.

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