

Beyond Vietnam: A time to Break Silence 50th Anniversary Celebration
The Riverside Church, New York City
April 4, 2017
Thomas V. Wolfe

Good evening. I am Tom Wolfe, president of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. On behalf of Iliff, I'm honored to welcome everyone here, and all who are joining us by live stream, as we reflect on the state of our nation's soul in light of Dr. King's prophetic witness in his Beyond Vietnam speech.

I'm grateful to this great congregation at Riverside Church, its senior minister Rev. Dr. Amy Butler and the Riverside staff for their hospitality and partnership in this 50th anniversary observance that comes at a critical time in our nation's history.

A year and a half ago, I felt a call to have Iliff and Riverside Church honor the deeply human connection between the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. Vincent Gordon Harding that was so much a part of this speech. The late Dr. Harding served on the Iliff faculty for more than two decades. He came to us having been an advisor to Dr. King and a servant of the Civil Rights Movement. He served Iliff as he did the movement, building on the school's core commitment to embody social justice. He awakened in our students a hunger to become leaders who possess courageous theological imaginations. His words – *"Now you know better, you do better,"* continue to reverberate within the hearts of all whom he taught. While at Iliff, he founded the Veterans of Hope Project, now celebrating 20 years. Many of the veterans are present with us this evening. We are grateful for their central role in this collaboration.

Dr. King, knowing that they were of the same heart and mind, asked Dr. Harding to draft for him a speech to condemn the war in Vietnam, but more than that, a speech that would declare a prophetic word to the nation, that the same injustice that was, and remains the focus of the Civil Rights Movement, was playing out on an international scale, particularly, through the travesty that was the war in Vietnam. Both agreed it was time that [QUOTE] *"we as a nation... undergo a radical revolution of values."* [UNQUOTE]. When I think about their relationship, I imagine the beautiful support with which they held each other as one was about to speak the hard word.

So, it is time for us to reunite the spirit and essence of these two courageous souls who continue to call us to, [QUOTE] *"recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."* [UNQUOTE]

This evening we commemorate a defining moment that disturbed the nation and [QUOTE] *"exposed a far deeper malady within the American spirit."* [UNQUOTE] Let us be clear, we are not here to remember only an isolated historical moment. We are here to let these words rouse the life force in our own spirits. We are here to claim again the inclusive vision of this speech as it stands in tension with the exclusive actions of a current administration. We are here to say, "Never again" to the aggressive rhetoric that emboldens people to act out against

their neighbors. We are here to set free in us the speech's original power to say, "Never again," each time we hear, "America First," roll far too easily from the tongues of our leaders. May it generate within us a renewed call to deeper humanness and, in its own words... *"A call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [human]kind."*

In that spirit...welcome.