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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ceremony of Remembrance and Plaque Dedication

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on Wednesday, April 4, 2018

Location: Shaffer Art Building

Remarks: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ceremony of Remembrance and Plaque Dedication

*The Chancellor was introduced by Special Assistant to the Chancellor,
Barry Wells*

Thank you, Barry, for your remarks reminding us of our history at Syracuse and thank you even more for reminding us of our unfinished business.

I have only a few brief remarks to emphasize what's already been said before we unveil this memorial plaque.

53 years ago, near this spot right here, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. gave an amazing speech at Syracuse University. I have read the speech. This is the type script of it. I have listened to the recently discovered audio recording of Dr. Willie's introduction and of the speech that is now preserved and accessible through our archives. My greatest hope is that, because of this plaque, generations of students and visitors to Syracuse University will have the curiosity to read and think about what Dr. King actually said here and to act on it.

It is a challenging speech. It poses a challenge to us that continues today. The speech begins as Barry Wells just indicated with Dr. Charles Willie telling the audience that Dr. King is a marked man. That he is a man arrested, a man targeted, a man putting himself very much at risk. And, as you heard alluded to by Dean Brian Konkol, Dr. King emphasizes in the speech that some things are so precious and so true

that “they are worth dying for.” And die for them Martin Luther King Jr., did, less than three years later, fifty years ago today at 7:05 pm.

But those things worth dying for, the things that Dr. King spoke of on this spot, were far beyond what some would like to remember Dr. King for today. Dr. King spoke here of the need for a basic assured subsistence income for all citizens, black and white, so that poor citizens could share in opportunity and education. Dr. King spoke here of the need for quality public schools and safe neighborhoods, rather than schools and neighborhoods so dramatically different based on race and by wealth. Dr. King spoke here of our collective refusal to acknowledge the brutal, simple truth that one of our historic foundations is the brutal subjugation and displacement of American Indians. In short, Dr. King spoke here about Syracuse and about northern cities – and northern universities – not just about the South.

Unlike most of you young folks, I was both alive and in upstate New York when Dr. King spoke here, and alive and in Upstate New York when Dr. King was murdered 50 years ago today. I was at a Boy Scout meeting that terrible night in 1968, on the North Side of the City of Rochester. My father came and interrupted the meeting to load me and my brother in the car and race us home because, in his words, “All the anger and frustration that has been provoked in this city for decades is about to blow.” And blow it eventually did, in Upstate New York, in Rochester, and not because people were mad at the South. People were mad about Rochester. They were mad about Upstate. They were mad about the precious and true things that Dr. King had now died for.

Are things that different today, in Upstate, in Syracuse, at this University? There has been a lot of progress. Syracuse and Syracuse University are in many ways a different place, in no small part due to the hard work and the struggle of many people, some of whom are with us here today and some of whom are with us in spirit. But.

But. If you read Dr. King's speech given near this spot, you will find so much of it still rings true. I am not talking about Memphis. I am not talking about the South. I am saying so much of Dr. King's speech given here still rings true right here, and right now.

So what do we do about that, here at this University (and it was a university that Dr. King that day kindly called a great institution of learning with a great and noble heritage)? I think we can, we must, do a lot. But for starters, it would be nice if we could honestly educate ourselves on what Dr. King said here about education and the Civil Rights Movement and how much of it applies here today. It will not be a comfortable education, but great education is rarely comfortable. May this plaque, may this day, inspire us to learn again what King said and stood for, including what he stood for right here, near this spot, shortly before his assassination.

Thank you.

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