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ELKTON — Community members braved below-freezing temperatures Monday morning to pack into Wright's AME Church for the 29th Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration and experience the enduring warmth of the civil rights leader's legacy.

Standing behind a podium at the front of the church, Bishop Frank M. Reid III asked attendees whether they live to benefit their own desires or the needs of everyone.

"Today in 2019, as we celebrate here in Cecil County, each one of us has to ask, 'Are our lives and our agendas rooted in destructive selfishness or dangerous unselfishness?'" he said.

Officials from county and town governments, police departments, schools, the library system, places of worship, businesses and more gathered in the church to honor King, who would have turned 90 years old on Jan. 15, and the values he fought for.

Reid reflected on the last sermon King gave April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tenn., before he was assassinated on April 4 on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel where he was staying. In that sermon, King told his audience, "Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness."

"He said that America and the world was becoming a selfish nation and a selfish world where those who had would take from those who had least and little," Reid said. "In 1968, he talked about how America was on a precipice of selfishness that would lead to national division and self-destruction."

The root of ongoing political division, Reid said, is that destructive selfishness. The bishop pointed to the current partial government shutdown — the longest government shutdown in the country's history — and other issues plaguing the nation as signs that King's work is not over.

“[King] would be concerned about the rising gap between the rich and the poor, and how the middle class is being squeezed out ... He would feel that there’s still a need to return to the gospel where we focus on the needs of not just those who have but the have-nots, the least, the lost and the left-out,” Reid said in an interview with the Whig.

But Reid told the churchgoers that King would also be pleased with the progress that has occurred since 1968, evident in the people of various backgrounds who came together at Monday’s service to carry on his message.

“I think that he would be so proud of the diversity of the crowd — not just racially, but economically, by education — and to him, that would represent progress,” Reid told the Whig.

Citing The Beatitudes in the Book of Matthew, Reid explained that being unselfish often draws persecution from the selfish, but he urged people to choose dangerous unselfishness despite the risk, and to fight especially for those who are less fortunate.

On her way to the church that morning, Sharon Thompson thought about King’s legacy.

“In some areas we’ve pushed forward, and in another respect we’ve come backward, it feels. That saddens me that we could’ve gone backward,” she said.

But Thompson said she was inspired by the speakers during the service, particularly by Reid’s message about striving to be unselfish in the face of danger.

“Sometimes you get a little complacent and you just don’t know what to do. It lit the fire for my light ... What we have inside of us, we have to share no matter what. It doesn’t matter what dangers we face, God is going to protect us and we need to let the light shine so we can unify.”

Tony Evans said he, too, would apply the messages from the service to his daily life.

“Everything that was said today, and like I do every church day when I go to church, I use that in my life,” Evans said. “It’s an everyday life thing. If you don’t pay attention to what was said, you never will. So anything I hear that motivates me, I use that in my life every single day.”

To combat selfishness, Reid told the Whig that society needs to stop thinking in terms of “us” and “them,” and start thinking in terms of “we.”

“I would say that instead of both the left and the right labeling people, that we begin to judge people not by their labels but by their actions ... Freedom comes out of love, not division,” he said.

Unselfishness isn’t as much a destination as it is an ongoing journey, Reid said.

“All of the saints had weaknesses,” he said. “You become a saint because your good works of letting your light shine outweigh your weaknesses ... Salvation is a process. You don’t come to the altar, declare you’re saved and then all of a sudden you’re perfect.”

That journey, he said, begins with taking the first steps toward realizing one’s own power to impact their community and the greater world.

“What we call ‘global society,’ Dr. King called it ‘the world’s house,’” Reid said. “When you let your light shine, everybody in the house is going to see it. If you’re the only voice at the PTA meeting, let your light shine. If you’re the only voice at the county council hearing, let your light shine ... When you refuse to let your light be hidden, whether by yourself or others, what you discover is you learn how to stand up, you learn how to speak up, and you learn how to show up.”