

Radical Love
A Sermon delivered at The UU Society of Laconia, NH
January 15, 2023

Today we celebrate Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
First and foremost, he was a man of God,
an African American Baptist minister,
guided by his love of Christ, who modeled for Dr. King
how best to walk humbly as a servant of God,
helping those in need around him.
Rev. King’s spiritual journey was a radical one,
where in the words of Dr. Cornell West, Black philosopher and activist,
Martin Luther King, Jr. “refused to silence his voice in his quest
for unarmed truth and unconditional love.
For King, the condition of truth was to allow suffering to speak;
for him, justice was what love looks like in public.”¹

Courageous and undaunting, King said
“I would rather be dead than afraid.”²
Rev. King was part of the black prophetic tradition,
“full of fire in his bones, love in his heart,
light in his mind, and courage in his soul.”³

¹ The Radical King. Edited and introduced by Cornel West. Boston: Beacon Press, 2017, Kindle Edition. p. 4.

² West, p. 5

³ Ibid.

King’s civil rights movement was a major threat to the status quo, and so, the FBI labelled him as “the most dangerous man in America.⁴” This was mainly because he was brave and courageous in organizing and mobilizing blacks and their supporters to challenge segregation as well as the economic injustices of his day.

Dr. King’s overarching goal was for “all poor and working people, (no matter what the color of their skin,) to live lives of decency and dignity.⁵” Rev. King dreamed of a freer and more democratic America and he would late in his life extend his dream to end oppressions of any person throughout the entire world because of the color of their skin.

But his dream was challenged again and again, wearing him down with the persistent presence of rampant racism, political stalemates, and ever-presence economic injustice.

He was well aware of the problems within our prisons of much higher numbers of blacks and people of color, which would lead, beyond his lifetime into Jim Crow mass incarceration as a result of the War on Drugs. Rev. King, with his war on poverty, sought to bring into the public awareness those who are hungry, those who are in need – the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and all working people.

In March of 1968, just prior to his assassination,

⁴ Ibid, p. 5

⁵ Ibid, p. 6

Rev. King mobilized the Poor People's Campaign.

In his own words, here is why he led the March on Washington:

**“So, I had to sit down with my friends and my associates
and think about the people with whom I live and work
all over the ghettos of our nation,
and I had to try to think up an alternative to riots on the one hand
and to timid supplications for justice on the other hand.**

**And I have come to see that it must be a massive movement
organizing poor people in this country to demand their rights
at the seat of government in Washington, D.C.**

Now, I said poor people, too, and by that, I mean all poor people.

**When we go to Washington,
we're going to have black people because black people are poor,
but we're going to also have Puerto Ricans
because Puerto Ricans are poor in the United States of America.**

We're going to have Mexican Americans because they are mistreated.

We're going to have Indian Americans because they are mistreated.

**And for those who will not allow their prejudice
to cause them to blindly support their oppressors**

we're going to have Appalachian whites with us in Washington.

**We're going there to engage in powerful nonviolent direct action to demand,
to bring into being an attention-getting dramatic movement,
which will make it impossible for the nation to overlook these demands.**

Now, they may not do anything about it.

People ask me, “Suppose you go to Washington, and you don't get anything?”

You ask people and you mobilize,

and you organize, and you don't get anything.

You've been an absolute failure.

My only answer is that when you stand up for justice, you never fail.⁶ “

**Over this past month I have read many
of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons and writings.
What has impressed me the most,
beyond his vast intellect and charismatic preaching,
beyond his profound faith in God,
beyond his dedication to help those he served,
is his dedication to nonviolence as a way he felt
would save our earth and its people from perishing.**

**In reading again about the Montgomery bus boycott,
I marvel at how courageous he was.
Where did that courage come from?
In part from his deep faith, yes.
and in part from his reading of our own nineteenth century
Unitarian great, Henry David Thoreau
with Thoreau's essay on *Civil Disobedienc.e*
Thoreau's main point was that there is a higher law than civil law
which demands the obedience of the individual.
In cases where civil law and individual conscience are in conflict,
Thoreau believed we need to follow our conscience,**

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. The Other America, March 10, 1968

and if necessary, disregard human law.

While Henry David Thoreau never spent a long time in jail, one day he was arrested for not paying his taxes because of his protest over the government's entry into the Mexican War of 1846.

He never paid these taxes, but was released the next day, when a friend came to his rescue and paid his taxes.

However, when he was in jail a humorous story arose.

The story may or may not be true.

The story goes like this:

Thoreau was visited by his good friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asked him, "Mr. Thoreau, what are you doing in there?"

And Thoreau quickly responded,

"Mr. Emerson, what are you doing out there?"

Following his conscience was more important to Thoreau than acting in ways that support something he viewed as harmful.

Rev. King's preaching reveals Thoreau's influence on him, as they both often appeal to a higher law and a call to conscience to do what one believes is right.

He also was deeply influenced by the liberation movement of Mahatma Gandhi, the great soul of India, who freed, as we all well know, the Indian people from British rule through nonviolent actions. Gandhi as well had been influenced by Thoreau's writings,

as had Leo Tolstoy, as well.

Rev. King was greatly influenced by Gandhi's life.

He preached that Gandhi was a Christian⁷,
even though Gandhi was not Christian, but Hindu.

In Rev. King's words:

**"It is one of the strangest ironies of the modern world
that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century
was not a member of the Christian Church.**

**...This man took the message of Jesus Christ
and was able to do even greater works
than Jesus did in his lifetime.**

Jesus himself predicted this: "Ye shall do even greater works."⁸

Rev. King was inspired by Gandhi's achieving
for his people independence through nonviolent means.

He knew that Gandhi had read the Sermon on the Mount, as well as Thoreau.

And Gandhi, King preached, "started reading the Bible, "turn the other
cheek," "resist evil with good," "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit
the earth."

And all these things inspired him.

He read Thoreau as he said that no just person
can submit to anything evil,

even if it means standing up and being disobedient to the laws of the state.

And so. this he combined into a new method,

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi*, March 29, 1959. Found in the Radical King, Kindle, p. 37.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. Found in *The Radical King*, Kindle ed. P. 35.

and he said to his people, “Now it is possible to resist evil. This is your first responsibility; never adjust to evil, resist it. But if you can resist it without resorting to violence or hate, you can stand up against it and still love the individuals that carry on the evil system that you are resisting.”⁹

This is King’s radical love.

To love those who are the oppressors.

Here is Dr. King preaching about such love:

“And I say to you, I have decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind’s problems.

And I’m going to talk about it everywhere I go.

I know that it isn’t popular to talk about it in some circles today.

And I’m not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love.

I’m talking about a strong, demanding love.

For I have seen too much hate.

I’ve seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South.

I’ve seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen

and too many White Citizens’ Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it,

I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities.

And I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear.

I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good,

I think you can find it through love.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., p.

**And the beautiful thing is that we are moving wrong when we do it,
because John was right, God is love.
He who hates does not know God,
but he who loves has the key
that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality.¹⁰**

To love your oppressors.

How many of us can do that?

Yet that is what Rev. King deeply held as the key to peace and justice.

To love not in a sentimental or affectionate way, no.

But to love in a compassionate, understanding and redemptive way.

**Three definitions of love found in Greek helped Rev. King define
what he meant by love:**

“First there is *eros*.

**In Platonic philosophy *eros* meant the yearning of the soul for the realm of the
divine.**

It has come to mean a sort of aesthetic or romantic love.

**Second, there is *philia*, which means intimate affection between personal
friends.**

***Philia* denotes a sort of reciprocal love;**

the person loves because he/she/they are loved.

When we speak of loving those who oppose us,

we refer to neither *eros* nor *philia*;

we speak of a love which is expressed in the Greek word *agape*.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here?* Southern Christian Leadership Conference. August 16, 1967. Kindle Edition. p. 178.

Rev. King said: “*Agape* means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart.”¹¹

Rev. King continues to define *agape* love as the love where an individual does not seek one’s own good, but the good of one’s neighbor (I Cor. 10:24). There is no judging of others’ worth for such love. People are loved *for their own sakes*.¹²

In Rev. King’s words “It is an entirely neighbor-regarding concern for others.”¹³

As our opening words from Dr. King expressed, This *agape* love is the cause of the creation of a movement for justice- “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.”¹⁴

Rev. King’s radical love would open his heart and mind and spirit

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*. Chapter entitled *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*. 1959.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. “*Where Do We Go From Here?*” Southern Leadership Conference, August 16, 1967.

to understand that such love was at the center of all the world's major religions-

at least in creed, if not in deed.

What is clear is that Rev. King became in my mind, at least, close to being a Unitarian Universalist in his theological inclusion of all faith traditions under the umbrella of his radical love.

God is found in all religions – this was his truth, and the truth for many of us as Unitarian Universalists.

Rev. King's nonviolent approach to justice is not easy to do.

But what is true for both Rev. King and for Gandhi is that when people are hurting and suffering enough, a nonviolent approach will work, especially if you have a leader who is filled with a sense of the wrongness of what is happening to people and feels called by his or her own faith to take action.

It is clear to me from studying Dr. King's writings over this past month that to have a successful nonviolent approach to justice making there needs to be training and discipline instilled in the participants, so that when the oppressors oppress, those oppressed do not succumb to such pressure.

To love your enemy, in spite of the great harm your enemy may do, is extremely difficult to accomplish.

But it is clear that to love your enemy

**is to understand the basic humanity in each person,
and that such radical love eventually will find a way into your enemy's heart,
breaking down the barriers to true connection.**

**Black Americans for centuries were treated as objects, not as persons.
To hold those who oppressed them as an "I-Thou" rather than an "I-it"
in Martin Buber's sense, is a remarkable achievement for all
who worked in the American Civil Rights Movement.
Such an achievement needs to be remembered and upheld,
and honored by all.**

**It is important that we honor Dr. King's life and legacy as a nation.
May we take today and Monday to think of just how amazing
the events of his life were, and how blessed we are as a nation
to have his legacy to help us move forward to continue
the spiritual journey where one is not judged by the color of one's skin,
but by one's character.**

**Rev. King sometimes quoted Rev. Theodore Parker,
great American transcendentalist
and Unitarian minister of the 19th century.**

Parker was a brave reformer and abolitionist.

**We find his words sprinkled in both President Lincoln's and Rev. King's
addresses, mostly without reference to Rev. Parker.**

We as Unitarian Universalists need to know of Parker's influence.

**So, let me end this sermon with one of Rev. Parker's
famous and oft quoted words:**

“The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.”

Just as Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr, found hope in these words, may we too, as we continue to work towards justice, to arrive at a place where, as the prophet Amos said, ever so long ago:

**“Justice will roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”**

Peace and love to you.

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