

Society's Needed Secret Ingredient: Love

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 19, 2020—Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

- Ephesians 3:14-21 (Good News Translation) ¹⁴For this reason I fall on my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name. ¹⁶I ask God from the wealth of his glory to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, ¹⁷and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, ¹⁸so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love. ¹⁹Yes, may you come to know his love — although it can never be fully known — and so be completely filled with the very nature of God. ²⁰To him who by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of: ²¹to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever! Amen.
- Matthew 5:43-48 (Good News Translation) ⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' ⁴⁴But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. ⁴⁶Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! ⁴⁷And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that! ⁴⁸You must be perfect — just as your Father in heaven is perfect.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Remembering the life and mission of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helps us embrace, embody and expand the saving power of God's love shown in Jesus.

What is my role here other than to try to present the life and teachings and actions of Jesus in a way that helps you embrace them, embody them, and extend them to the world. That's what any pastor tries to do.

Our nation's history includes the example of many preachers who were and are held in high regard because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They tried to follow the example of Jesus and communicate the truth to be discovered in his ministry and teaching. A few preachers gained "fame" because of their compelling style, perhaps, or the power of their message, or maybe simply because of their proximity to prominent people. A hall-of-fame-type list of those nationally renowned preachers in America's history might include people like:

- Dwight L. Moody, the nineteenth-century evangelist to Chicago's immigrants and namesake of the Moody Bible Institute;
- Billy Sunday, the Major League baseball player-turned-traveling evangelist at the beginning of the twentieth century;
- Peter Marshall, the Scottish-American Presbyterian pastor who was appointed as Chaplain to the United States Senate after World War II;
- the last century's greatest name in conducting evangelistic crusades across the country and around the world, the Rev. Billy Graham;
- and in recent decades, preachers whose teaching and appearances and books have garnered the attention of the general public, people like the thoughtful Barbara Brown-Taylor and the refreshing, status-quo-challenging Rachael Held Evans who died last year at the tragically young age of thirty-seven.

But was there another voice who had a greater impact on this country and the world than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Of course, in one sermon on a holiday weekend I can't summarize the "greatest hits" of Dr. King. The volume of his collected speeches, essays, letters and books would overwhelm even the most eager librarian and detailed biographer. His son Dexter Scott King stated that his father authored over 200,000 documents.¹

But what I will do this morning is highlight several brief King quotations. Dr. King was always a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As he advocated for social justice in the nation and the world, his rationale was based on the teachings of Jesus as we receive them in scripture.

The first quotation from Dr. King is this: **"Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend."**

He based that assertion, I believe, on something Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount at the end of Matthew Chapter 5. Jesus quoted a saying, and because of the way Jesus introduced it, the saying was probably quite well known at the time. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the [children] of your Father in heaven."² The unspoken message is that there is no reason to maintain someone in your life as an enemy.

Who are enemies? People who don't agree with you? People who compete against you for some resource or achievement? So some *idea* or *thing* is keeping you from having a constructive or respectful relationship with another? Jesus proposed a different approach. Trusting Jesus gives us a powerful resource: the redemptive power of love. Love has the power to redeem. Love can take something that is worn out and refresh it. Love can rebuild a relationship that is broken. Love can take a harmful intent and redirect it for a positive result.

Dr. King explained this teaching of Jesus this way:

"Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies."³

In Chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul quotes some verses from the Old Testament book of Proverbs which reinforce Jesus' encouragement to love one's enemies. Paul quotes, "20 No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' [Then Paul adds,] 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Okay, "heaping burning coals" on someone's head doesn't sound like the most loving, peaceful course of action. It would help to know if that expression had a special meaning back in Bible times. Scholars have identified two possibilities:

One thought is that to "heap burning coals on his head" means to stop the conversation by fulfilling whatever need exists. For example, if your friend yells at you because you won't let him eat something in your lunch, you can offer the item to him plus more. That will more than fulfill his need and stop his anger, perhaps even stirring a realization about the meanness in his heart because it is in stark contrast to your act of kindness.

Another thought is that to "heap burning coals on his head" refers to a time when keeping one's hearth fire alive was a life-saving necessity. If someone could not keep their

¹ Coretta Scott King *et. al.*, *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Companion: Quotations from the Speeches, Essays and Books of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, xii.

² Matthew 5:43-45a Good News Translation

³ <https://www.keepinspiring.me/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/>, accessed 1/14/2020

fire going, then [he] would go around the town, carrying some sort of container on his head, asking for hot coals to rekindle his fire. Putting coals in this container on his head would benefit him, fulfilling his need, and helping him.

Either way we interpret this phrase, Paul is saying to pay kindness to your enemies instead of trying to hurt them. Do not allow their mean or sinful actions to control you; make the decision to choose peace as your response.⁴

That was Dr. King's message to the various parties in American society that were at odds with each other: love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend. It was in that vein that Abraham Lincoln suggested, "Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"⁵

But sometimes there's a pre-existing obstacle to showing love: a need to forgive.

Over the holidays Mary and I had the pleasure of seeing the movie, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" featuring Tom Hanks playing Fred Rogers, beloved host of the children's program "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." While the movie wasn't at all what I expected, it was thoroughly delightful and soul-touching. In the movie, a character has numerous encounters with Mr. Rogers the TV program host and Fred Rogers the person. As a result, the character discovers (to his *great* surprise) that the opportunity exists to forgive someone he'd held a bitter and painful grudge against for years and years.

Author Anne Lamott is just one of many people who have described the toxic effect of refusing to forgive using the analogy of poison. Lamotte wrote, "...not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die." And poet Maya Angelou pointed out the necessary ingredient in order for forgiveness to free you: "You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. I don't mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, 'I forgive. I'm finished with it.'"⁶

So the opportunity to show love and the powerful effect of forgiving are two lessons of Jesus that Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly presented to the world in quotable statements like, "**I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear,**" and "**[The one] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.**"⁷

Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of America's foremost preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's end this reflection on Dr. King by talking about how to get started. The focus of Dr. King's ministry was leading society to recognize its capability and responsibility to respect and empower all persons without regard to distinctions or differences like appearance or religion, education or economic status, native language or geographic location. Dr. King's framework for society, his vision for America was based on the teachings of Jesus who unhesitatingly respected and accepted the powerless of his day: children, women, foreigners, those with illnesses of the mind or body, impoverished people.

In his tragically abbreviated life Dr. King helped our society move forward a bit. But still our nation tolerates disparities in wages, infant mortality rates, employment opportunities, scholastic achievement, life expectancy, incarceration rates, wealth. Many of these disparities can be traced to historical practices of racial and ethnic discrimination.⁸ Those injuries continue to afflict our society today, and the prospect of working to heal them and eliminate them is, in a word, overwhelming.

So how did Jesus change the world? "Day by Day," as the popular song says. Person by person, relating to each person with sincere love and appreciation... sort of like Mr. Rogers.. Jesus didn't succeed in fixing the entire world. But he started. And he continued.

The example and the legacy of Dr. King urges us to do the same: start. Do something in your life today to show the love of Jesus. Then do something else. That's how Jesus did it. As Martin Luther King, Jr. urged, "**Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.**"

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⁴ <https://412teens.org/qna/what-does-it-mean-to-heap-burning-coals-on-your-enemys-head.php> accessed 1/15/2020

⁵ <https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/not-forgiving.html> accessed 1/15/2020

⁶ <https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/not-forgiving.html> accessed 1/15/2020

⁷ <https://www.KeepInspiring.me/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/>, accessed 1/14/2020

⁸ "20 Facts and U.S. Inequality Everyone Should Know," <https://inequality.stanford.edu/publications/20-facts-about-us-inequality-everyone-should-know>, accessed 1/15/2020