

Through the Teachings of Dr. King

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 18, 2026

Immediately following the death of George Floyd, the country erupted in protests. Residents of city after city gathered en masse to resist police brutality and racial injustice. I joined a protest in Washington DC, gathering with thousands who fought for a just and equitable world, standing side by side. We were angry and determined, and that was palpable, and we resisted. We resisted by hearing testimony from Rev. Al Sharpton. From hearing the testimony of family members of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. We resisted with our chants - this is what democracy looks like! With our signs and our overwhelming presence. I cannot help but relate this to the emotional turmoil we have felt these past two weeks. I lift up the powerful words of Minnesota Governor Walz: "We can – we must – protest: loudly, urgently, but also peacefully."¹ In hearing this speech I'm reminded of the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."²

This love and compassion are what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. embodied in response to a deeply racist, hateful, violent, and prejudiced country. To a broken, unjust, and inequitable world. He taught and lived a life of agape love and nonviolence, embedded and inspired by his Christian faith, rooted in his theology. It was his Baptist faith that served as a bedrock in his resistance, and so it is this faith that we begin with.

What was the faith of King that led to profound acts to counter segregation, discrimination, and economic injustice? First, were the teachings and actions of Jesus. One of the prophets of our own faith, and an exemplar for us as well. He found guidance from the parable of Good Samaritan, teaching care and compassion across hate, animosity, and societal divides. From the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, contrasting a self-righteous Pharisee, immersed in his own virtue, alongside a humble tax collector who asks for God's mercy. The parable

¹ Statement from Gov. Tim Walz

² *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

teaches that acts of piety are not enough – that true religion must be inward and based in morality – as was King’s faith.³ And he drew from the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. A wealthy man lives a life of luxury while an unhoused and hungry man lies at his gate. Upon death, the poor man heals while the rich man suffers. We are called towards compassion and justice, not indifference.⁴

King also drew upon Liberation Theology. God - the sacred, the holy - is an all-loving entity, embracing each finite being. Yet, this loving essence shows preferential treatment for the least of these – remaining on the side of the oppressed, liberating the oppressed. The marginalized, the ostracized, the dehumanized. This is where we undoubtedly find the divine and the divine’s unconditional love. King found his God amongst those suffering from racism and economic inequality. We are called to heal those immersed in divine compassion.

And before we speak of love, we need to understand King’s embodiment of agape love. Agape love is not romantic love or self-love. It is not affectionate. It is an unconditional desire for well-being, offered even to enemies. It is universal. It is a catalyst towards actions that serve to heal. It seeks the basic well-being of all others, including those whom we may feel to be undeserving. And – it is hard. Loving our enemies is truly difficult and may seem to be the total antithesis of what our hearts and minds are telling us to do. But connect with your heart and that still, small voice within. “True pacifism,” or “nonviolent resistance,” King wrote, is “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love.”⁵ Love is courageous.

Through his grounding in the Christian faith, King fought against what he termed the Triple Evils: Poverty, racism, and militarism. These are interconnected and interwoven, serving as

³ "Pride Versus Humility: The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁴ "The Impassable Gulf (The Parable of Dives and Lazarus)," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁵ *Stride Toward Freedom* pg. 79 by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

barriers to the Beloved Community that King aspired to create. Working to affect and heal one affects all three.⁶ We see these three here, today, now, serving to the detriment of the United States and our communities. Attacking countries and deploying the national guard – it is unprecedented. He was fascinated with the idea that he drew from the actions of Gandhi – “refusing to cooperate with an evil system.”⁷ – and these are evil systems. Instead, we actively work against them – all three. And we are able to do this through King's six principles of nonviolence.

What are these principles of nonviolence? These are core teachings of Dr. King. One, violence is not the only way to resist the evils of society. In fact, violence is not the answer at all. Violence is an easy form of retaliation, yet it only leads to cycles of more and more hardship. We continue to resist and we do it peacefully. Second, nonviolence brings understanding. Now, I grappled with this one. What of understanding ICE officers who incite violence, or politicians who disparage an entire group of people? Reconciliation - understanding - is not ignoring the harms that have been committed but facing the difficult truth together. In this way, Beloved Community can be born. Third, quote, “evil itself, not the people committing evil acts, should be opposed.” Evil is systemic. Evil is the institution of racism, xenophobia, militarism, authoritarianism, war, apartheid. These institutions serve to shape masses of people towards unjust, violent, and unethical actions. Fourth, we are called to, quote, “suffer without retaliation.” This is redemptive. Suffering for a just cause is transformative and educational. Fifth, nonviolent resistance avoids both physical, external violence as well as “internal violence of the spirit.” Quote, “The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but he also refuses to hate him.” We avoid physical violence of the wrongdoers and all that it creates. Yet we also avoid that which affects the soul – inner unchecked anger, fierce judgment, a call towards retaliation. If we engage with these, we harm ourselves in the process. The sixth and final principle of nonviolence: we must have a deep and abiding faith in the future. A future where compassion and not fear can serve as a guiding force. Where greed and power lose their

⁶ “The Triple Evils” from The King Center

⁷ *Stride Toward Freedom* pg. 73 by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

lure. Where people are treated as individuals, not as -isms. Furthermore, it is the oft quoted belief that “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Though not immediate, there is moral progress, requiring the work of individuals and institutions alike. Small setbacks are overwhelmed with positive progress. It reminds us that our struggles lead to greater morality.⁸

What does our own faith teach us about love and nonviolence? We, as a faith, recently voted to articulate the tenets of our faith through six values. We have a visual – a flower – with one center and six petals. And the center? The center is love. This is the root of all that we stand for as a faith community. And it is, as I understand it, agape love. We cannot embrace our interdependence unless we fully believe in a love that heals and connects all sentient beings. We cannot celebrate pluralism if we do not rejoice, love, and recognize as sacred the world’s people and all the gifts of diversity we offer one another. We cannot practice equity if we do not affirm everyone’s inherent dignity and worthiness. The just, equitable, and compassionate society we aim to create as a faith movement is based on the tenet of love. We believe in the goodness of people. At the conclusion of her journal, Anne Frank wrote, “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”⁹ Anne Frank articulates her belief in the goodness of humanity despite all she faced in her fight for survival. There are so many inherently good people in this world. We pass them in the grocery store, the library, the sidewalk. Find hope.

What can these teachings offered by Rev. Dr. King say about the societal maladies we face today? Dr. King taught us that “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”¹⁰ What happens if we seek to drive out hate with even more hate? It becomes a perpetual cycle that feeds upon itself, creating increasing division and unchecked anger. There is a place for justifiable anger – in fact we truly need this anger in any fight for justice. Anger fueled by opposition to xenophobia and brutality. But may

⁸ “Nonviolence” by Stanford University’s The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute

⁹ *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank

¹⁰ “Loving Your Enemies” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

this justifiable anger serve, not to our detriment, but as a catalyst towards healing a world steeped in inequities as we take to the streets for justice. We cannot let ICE or power-seeking politicians strip us of our morals and convictions and replace them with unchecked anger or violent ruminations – for it is these very same morals and convictions that guide us towards justice. Only love can drive out hate – only light can drive out darkness. We need to be reminded to remain grounded in our faith and in our basic redemptive tenets that serve to heal our world. Fight the powers that be – politicians inciting violence, their many perpetrators, ICE – with the teachings of nonviolent resistance.

I offer this: we cannot let unjustified anger and unchecked violence overcome our morals and convictions. We cannot let our hope and compassion be overridden by all the evils we are fighting against – poverty, racism, and militarism. We cannot give up our values, principles, ethics, and guiding forces grounded in our faith when met with systemic injustice. Perhaps most importantly, we cannot let hate to overpower our love.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent each day working to create his goal of what he termed Beloved Community – facilitating boycotts, sit-ins, marches, civil disobedience – all towards creating a just and equitable society. He taught generations of activists how to embody their best, most transformative selves. Beloved Community was his driving vision of an integrated, just, and compassionate community. Where everyone knows safety, belonging, and equity. Where everyone's inherent worth is realized and celebrated. He saw this world created through individual and societal transformation.¹¹ It is an idealistic world, yet it is one we can strive to create in each of our days; work initiated by our own Unitarian Universalist faith. We know how these ideals work in interpersonal relationships – our individual lives and interactions. Disputes between friends, partners, or coworkers. This is a practice to bring to the country as a whole; to heal the broken and beautiful world and create that oft sought after Beloved Community as presented by Dr. King. It is time to make our ideologies a reality. So, go forth – practice nonviolent resistance. Work against systems, not people. Do not practice brutality in mind or in

¹¹ “The Beloved Community” from The King Center

action. Abstain from hate and unchecked anger. Fight through just and nonviolence ways – through boycotts, marches, sit-ins – the triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism. Have faith in the future. Resist people and institutions through agape love. Go forth to do your part in healing this broken and beautiful world.

May it be so, and Amen.