

Sunday, January 15, 2017
The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose feast we celebrate today, was an American Baptist minister who led the struggle against racial discrimination in the 60s. He was a provocative preacher, and passionately advocated the principle of non-violent protest, affirming that one's opponents should be tackled with compassion rather than aggression. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 and in 1968 he was assassinated. He was born on the 15th of January in 1929 in Atlanta Georgia.

Reverend King once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." Undoubtedly, for our nation this is one such time. No matter where you stand on any the hot issues of our days, our media is steeped in a maddening dissection of one controversy or another. In fact, since the election season began, leading on to the primaries and through the election of the nation's 45th president, people have polarized, demonized, demonstrated, and families have been divided over political persuasions and "challenge and controversy" has become a new status quo, an understatement of the political scene of our country. And King's words echo nearly half a century later: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." We stand at a crossroads in time where our faith will be tested, specifically in our ability to love our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors, and our enemies. Bear with me, and I'll unpack this a little for us.

First we need to define some terms. Let's start with love. Hallelujah our Good Lord did not say we have to *like* our enemies, because that would be pretty difficult. I try my hardest to like every single one of you here at All Saints and that alone is a challenge—just kidding, you know I love you all. See—I just did it...there's a fundamental difference between love and like and we have to unpack what it means to love an enemy we don't like if we are ever going to succeed in following this teaching of Christ. In Greek, many of you probably know already, there are three words for love, all translated as love, but with very different meanings: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. Rather than reinvent the wheel, in King's own words, I'm going to let him unpack these terms for us. In his sermon entitled "Loving Your Enemies" Reverend King says:

"The Greek language, as I've said so often before, is very powerful at this point.... It talks about love as eros. That's one word for love. Eros is a sort of, aesthetic love.... And it's come to us to be a sort of romantic love, though it's a beautiful love...."

Then the Greek language talks about philia, and that's another type of love that's also beautiful. It is a sort of intimate affection between personal friends. And this is the type of love that you have for those persons that you're friendly with, your intimate friends, or people that you call on the telephone and you go by to have dinner with, and your roommate in college and that type of thing. It's a sort of reciprocal love. On this level,

you like a person because that person likes you. You love on this level, because you are loved....

*The Greek language comes out with another word for love. It is the word *agape*. And *agape* is more than *eros*; *agape* is more than *philia*; *agape* is something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it's what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You look at every man, and you love him because you know God loves him. And he might be the worst person you've ever seen."*

We will continue to face opportunities in the days ahead when we will be tested in our ability to love in a Christ-like way. In this polarized nation, whoever you cast a vote for in the elections, whatever your approval ratings of this or of that, you will be confronted with the challenge of how well you can love the brother or sister next to you on the bus, in the theatre, in the pew at church whose views of the world are contrary to your own. And love is the only force that holds true power. Strength and might perhaps rise forth from the mire, but love is the only sustainable force that will last the test of eternity—and I want to reassure you that you are a passenger for an eternal journey. Let me say that again. Love— a promiscuous *agape* love unrestrained, unrestricted— is the only sustainable force that will last the test of eternity. Hatred, violence, might, dominance, and fear stand like a village of sand castles built on a roaring beach. Reverend King himself said, "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." Or in other words of his, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

The next word lesson is the term Episcopalians aren't fond of— *hamartia*, which is the Greek word commonly translated as sin. In Greek, which the New Testament was written in, this term literally means "to miss the mark"—it comes from archery. I can confidently say before you today, I your rector am sinful. I am not perfect. I do not love perfectly; I do not forgive perfectly; I do not hold in perfect regard all my brothers and sisters. This is part of our shared human condition, our propensity to fall short. All this talk about enemies really raises the question, "Who is my enemy?" While Jesus didn't tell a succinct parable along those lines, but in his letter to the Romans Saint Paul's words shed some light for us, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil . . ."

Our enemies are not "enemies of blood and flesh"—people—but they are "spiritual forces of evil." Take 1 Corinthians 13 gives us a glimpse into who our enemies are, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." Impatience, unkindness and hatred. These are the enemies of the Gospel. Envy, arrogance, and rudeness are our enemies. Inhospitability, bigotry, green, injustice, selfishness—these are our enemies.

And our work in the world is to go forth as a people empowered by the love of the Gospel to dismantle these forces in the world. Reverend King says, “With patient and firm determination we will press on until every valley of despair is exalted to new peaks of hope, until every mountain of pride and irrationality is made low by the leveling process of humility and compassion; until the rough places of injustice are transformed into a smooth plane of equality of opportunity; and until the crooked places of prejudice are transformed by the straightening process of bright-eyed wisdom.”

But we cannot conflate the soul of our enemy with the tarnish of their sin, and herein lays the key to loving even our enemies. We have all been limited by our genetics and shaped by the nurture or lack thereof of childhood and the circumstances of our lives. I say this not to excuse any sin, but to put us all on the same playing field as broken, frail, sinful humans stumbling around, struggling through this journey of life, tainted by our fears, fancies, and fantasies. King continues, “A second thing that an individual must do in seeking to love his enemy is to discover the element of good in his enemy, and every time you begin to hate that person and think of hating that person, realize that there is some good there and look at those good points...” He continues, “I’ve said to you on many occasions that each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality. We’re split up and divided against ourselves. And there is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives...there is this continual struggle within the very structure of every individual life.”

In seeing this in ourselves and our so-called “enemies,” our deep, promiscuous *agape* love emerges from a place of compassion. When our enemies become hatred and fear, I face my hateful, fearful brother as a victim. And so we our hatred shifts to love, as we are moved to bring healing to a world of people scarred by fear . . . a world of people poisoned by hatred . . . a world of people who’ve labeled each other friends and enemies. Such labels do not exist in the Kingdom of God.

And so, with these principles of love how do we move forward back into a world marred by “challenge and controversy”? A land and world tainted by problems and divisions that feel insurmountable. This force of love will be our weapon. And as King once said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Together we will continue this journey.

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