

Embodied Grace: The Life of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
January 15, 2012

Matthew 5:38-48

38“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?

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Grace. Amazing grace! Hail Mary, full of grace. Good gracious, what does it mean?

Every religious tradition claims a concept of grace. We are going to lean on the definition offered in a book I frequently pull off my shelf, *Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals*. Here's what one Unitarian Universalist describes: Grace is a blessing, a blessing that is undeserved, unsolicited, and unexpected, a blessing that brings a sense of the divine order into our lives. The ways of grace are mysterious, we cannot figure them out. But we know grace by its fruits, by the blessing of its works.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking about that great quote from John Wesley the founder of Methodism who said, “Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.” So apparently, from the 18th to the 21st century, there have been and are those who hold a graceful tension in their hearts.

If you are one of those people, hold on. We'll take a closer look at the theological underpinnings of grace next week. This week we look to a man who embodied grace and blessed the world with grace, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To the cynic, (and we live in a cynical age) his may seem like a quaint grace. One from another time. Thankfully, some of Dr. King's contemporaries are still alive and point out some stark realities.

When President Obama received the Nobel Prize, some raised eyebrows because it didn't seem that his was a purists' non-violence – meaning, no violence can come to any amount of good. To which President Obama's defenders said that Dr. King's time was a different time. Now is the terrorists' time, they said. Different times call for different approaches, they said. To which the elders responded with some indignation,

“The man’s house was bombed. His wife and infant child were in the house at the time.”

It was January, 1957 - one month after Mrs. Parks took her stand when she took her seat. Dr. King had just agreed to be the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association - MIA - and by doing so he and his family became the focus and target of violence and hatred.

Dr. King was at an MIA meeting when he heard the news. He told the crowd what had happened and then left the church.

Imagine being in that church and hearing this news. Imagine being the Kings’ neighbors. You are scared. You are angry. You perhaps temporarily lose sight of the movement’s peaceful foundation.

When Dr. King arrived at his house there was a barricade of white policemen standing before an angry crowd of black neighbors and supporters touting guns and knives. Dr. King pushed his way into the house to be sure that his wife and their 10-week old baby were safe. (It bears repeating: his wife and their 10-week old baby.) Because they had been in the back of the house, Mrs. King and the baby survived the bombing.

Also in the house there were white journalists covering the story. They were fearful of leaving the house – perhaps fearful of both the police and the crowd.

One man describes the scene this way:

King walked out onto the front porch. Holding up his hand for silence, he tried to still the anger by speaking with an exaggerated peacefulness in his voice. ‘Everything [is] all right,’ he said. ‘Don’t get panicky. Don’t do anything panicky. Don’t get your weapons. If you have weapons, take them home. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what Jesus said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.

When the crowd of several hundred was silent, he continued, ‘I did not start this boycott. I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop. If I am stopped, our work will not stop. For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us.’ Taylor Branch, in *Parting the Waters*

This is no quaint, from another time, holds-no-water-in-this-time kind of story. This is a man who walked the talk that another rabble rouser offered to the crowds, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other.”

Dr. King spoke with an exaggerated peacefulness in his voice when he faced that crowd of hundreds of people – and the police. He embodied the grace that said to those neighbors and to the world, “I am a man, worthy of a dignified life.” That’s grace.

He frequently preached on the text which was our reading this morning – the pesky one about loving your enemy. In a 1957 sermon to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he preached that really, the enemy on which justice seekers should focus are the evil *systems* that keep good people down. To hate one’s enemy is to unleash more evil into the world while likely holding the oppressive system in place. There’s not a stitch of grace in hating one’s enemy, in seeking an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. As a wise man once pointed out, this system of vengeance just leaves us with a lot of blind, toothless people.

Imagine facing the violence of hatred straight on. Taking on the doctrine of bigotry with one of love. Standing before the snarling dogs with a calm heart – one born of the doctrine of non-violence.

And grace – the grace embodied by Dr. King that is mirrored by Unitarian Universalism’s first guiding principle that honors the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

We have much to learn from Dr. King. Erik Wingrove Haugland preached last week encouraging us to work toward a more inclusive society; reckoning with a culture still struggling with racist systems regardless of the progress we have realized since Dr. King’s house was bombed.

I can’t imagine that Dr. King would be satisfied. And with his characteristic ferocity and grace, he would inspire us to do more.

We honor him today as we are inspired by his teachings every day.

Amen.