

## SERMON

Delivered January 19, 2020 by Dr. Theodore A. Johnson

HARVARD UNITARIAN CHURCH

### ***FOLLOWING THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE***

#### I. Intro

Fifty-two years ago, on April 4, 1968, we lost Martin Luther King Jr. to an assassin's bullet at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Tomorrow, January 20, we will acknowledge MLK Day. It is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Monday of January (around his birthday). A believer and practitioner of Social Justice – Dr. King once said:

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”*

And I would add... “if we allow it.”

Monday is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the **day of service** that celebrates Dr. King's life and legacy. It should be thought of as

a **day-on, rather than a day off**. It is the only Federal holiday designated as a national day of service --- and all Americans are encouraged to volunteer in some way to improve their communities. Look on line for #MLKDAY -- and find a locale to volunteer and get engaged.

Of course I, and many in my generation, were alive and heard the crushing news of Dr. King's assassination. It was a moment that seemed as if the whole nation and many around the world were struck into stunned silence and profound pain. Only recently have I begun to fully embrace the work of Dr. King, not only as a person of color – but also as an academic and practitioner in the fields of human rights and social justice.

Three years ago, I met Ruth Henry – a Watertown middle school teacher who was teaching the concepts & tools of what is called **Kingian Nonviolence** to elementary and middle school students, along with community members and police officers. I attended some of her classes – and learned about the Center for Nonviolence and Peace studies at the University of Rhode Island. Over the course of two summers, I became certified to teach the Kingian Nonviolence curriculum. My first course was co- taught to a wonderful group of international students at the University for Peace in Costa Rica (including Donnalisa).

Recently, I've just started a new course at Brandeis called "The Philosophy and Practice of Kingian Nonviolence."

More locally, I've worked with Chief Denmark and we're in the process of introducing this curriculum into Harvard's Middle

and High School. Ruth, Donnalisa and I expect to get that started sometime this Spring.

## ORIGINS OF KINGIAN NONVIOLENCE AS A PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

II. Dr. King's pilgrimage to nonviolence began with what he calls the **inseparable twins**: racial injustice and economic injustice. Poor whites were exploited just as much as blacks.

While at Morehouse (1944) King read Thoreau's Civil Disobedience – refusing to cooperate with an evil system – which was his first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Later while at Crozer Seminary (1948) he read Rauschenbusch on Christianity & the Social Crisis and other topics on how the gospel deals with the whole person;

not only the soul but also the body and spiritual well-being.

**“Religion that ends with the individual --- ends.”** Other

philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hobbs, Bentham, Locke and Marx further stimulated his thinking.

In early 1959, Dr. King, wife Coretta and Dr L.D. Riddick journeyed to India –where he found the people generous and hospitable. He observed a vast amount of crowded humanity and poverty. Still, India had found ways to live in a democracy of 400 million people without a dictatorship of either the “right” or “left”. He was accepted by Gandhi and visited the place where Gandhi started the well-known walk to the sea to gather local salt – rather than buying it from England. A critical concept emerging from the salt march is that of **Satyagraha**. **Satya** means truth which equals love, and **agraha** means force.

Together, Satyagraha means **truth force or love force**. This concept is significant and has become an important building block for Dr. King's practice in nonviolence.

Before reading Gandhi's writings and visiting him in India, King believed the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships – as in turning the other cheek. Gandhi was the first person to lift the love ethic of Jesus from individual transactions to a powerful social force. It was this emphasis on love and nonviolence that King came to as a method for social reform – the intellectual and moral satisfaction -- merging the studies of Bentham, Mill, Hobbs, Rousseau, Niebuhr and others.

While studying for his PhD with Allen Knight Chalmers at Boston University, King came to see that Niebuhr

overemphasized the corruption of human nature. His pessimism concerning human nature was not balanced by optimism concerning divine nature. He was so involved in diagnosing man's sickness of sin that he overlooked the cure of grace.

After graduating from BU, King was invited to become the Pastor of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church – only a couple of blocks from and in sight of the Alabama State Capital in Montgomery -- where on its steps in 1963 Governor George Wallace declared: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” While at Dexter Ave, King began work on his **6 principles of nonviolence.**

**Montgomery and Dexter Ave Baptist Church, and MLK's 6 principles of nonviolence.**

***One: Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people:***

Gandhi often said that if cowardice is the only alternative to violence, it is better to fight. The concept of “passive resistance” often gives the false impression of a “do-nothing” method. In fact, it is a positive force confronting the forces of injustice, and utilizes righteous indignation and the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capabilities of people as the vital force for change and reconciliation. (Salt march example)

***Two: The Beloved Community is the framework for the future.***

Nonviolence does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win their friendship and understanding. The

nonviolent resister must often express protest through noncooperation or boycotts. These are not the ends.<sup>1</sup> They are merely a means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent – the end result is the creation of the beloved community – while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.

**Three: *Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.*** For example, in Montgomery Dr. King said: “The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is, in essence, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Examples: Montgomery; Legacy Museum (from enslavement to mass incarceration) and The National Memorial For Peace and Justice (aka the lynching museum)

<sup>2</sup> See the movie – “Just Mercy based on one story of the efforts of a white sheriff in Alabama to arrest, charge, convict, and sentence a black man to death. A brave and heroic attorney, Brian Stevenson, took on the case ultimately resulting in exoneration and dismissal of the case.

**Four: Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause to achieve the goal.** Regarding the salt march in India, Gandhi said: *“Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood. The nonviolent resister is willing to accept violence if necessary, but never to inflict it...”*.

The moral authority of voluntary suffering for a goal communicates the concern to one’s own friends and community as well as to the opponent.

**Five: Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external physical violence.** The nonviolent mindset should permeate all aspects of your efforts. A nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but also refuses to hate them. This can be done only by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives. Love in this sense is meant within the Greek sense of

Agape – which means understanding redeeming goodwill for all humankind.

Agape is not a weak, passive love – it is love in action – seeking to preserve and create community. One who works against community is working against the whole of creation.

Booker T. Washington once said: “Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him.”

Ultimately, agape means recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated, all humanity is involved in a single process, and all are brothers and sisters. Therefore, if you harm your brother or sister, you harm yourself. And if you help your brother or sister, or reach out to them, you engage in mutual aid and assistance.

EXAMPLE: Bloody Sunday – From Brown Chapel to **Edmond Pettis Bridge** in Selma – later and continuing the march to Montgomery for voter registration.

OUR COMPASSIONATE LISTENING GROUP AT BASE OF  
EDMOND PETTIS BRIDGE

After crossing the Edmond Pettis Bridge, our Compassionate Listening Group rested by the Alabama River where I discovered some family roots I'd never known. A park guide pointed out that ancestors of the Poarch Creek Indians lived along the Alabama River in what is not Selma. My great grandmother – who lived in our California home until my mid teens – was a Cherokee-Creek Indian. Perhaps it was my Alex Haley moment -- similar to when he discovered the home of his family ancestor, Kunta Kinte, in the village of Juffure in Gambia. As a result of this journey, I've come to a new sense of connection with this space – something I'd not anticipated.

**Six: *The universe is on the side of justice.***

Truth is universal within human society, and each human being is oriented toward the just sense of order in the universe. The fundamental values in all the world's great religions are included in this --- which is my favorite Kingian principle – and a substantial reason I chose to become a lawyer: The principle is -- as often stated by Dr. King -- **“the arc of the moral universe is long, and it bends toward justice...”** For the nonviolent believer and practitioner, nonviolence introduces a new moral context in which nonviolence is **both the means and an end.**

In Closing – I've chosen to explore a few essential points from MLK's Letter from a Birmingham Jail – which was written in response to a public statement expressed by eight Alabama clergymen and directed to Dr. King, who was at that time in jail

for being an outside agitator.<sup>3</sup> The clergymen's letter to Dr. King accused him of inciting racial friction in Birmingham, causing racial tension and demonstrations by "outsiders" that were unwise and untimely. The clergy argued that the problems were local and needed a local cure. They pointed out that actions which incite hatred even though "technically peaceful" had not resolved the local problems. The clergy urged the Black community to withdraw support from these demonstrations and observe the rule of law and order.

While this entire document would benefit from a deep study, I will mention only a few of King's responses; he begins with:

My Dear Fellow Clergymen...

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<sup>3</sup> The list included the Bishop of Alabama, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Alabama Diocese, the Rabbi of the Birmingham Temple, Bishop of the Methodist Church, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama, and leaders of the Presbyterian and Baptist churches in Birmingham.

In response to the accusation that outsiders were causing the demonstrations, King pointed out that he was President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with offices in Alabama, and that he was invited to Birmingham and had organizational ties to the state. He further stated “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their message far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, so I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my hometown.”

In another paragraph, the clergy recognized a natural impatience when hopes are slow in being realized – but still pointed out that such demonstrations were unwise and untimely. In response, MLK observed that you (the ministers) deplore the demonstrations in Birmingham, but “your

statement fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations...I'm sure that none of you would want to accept the superficial social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes."

While there is much more..., the clergymen's letter concluded:

"We strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense."

In response in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail", MLK responded: "The answer is found in the fact that there are two

types of laws, just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’”

In Summary: I trust these comments on Kings journey to non-violence are helpful to you – as they have been for me. With all that I’ve read and practiced – I’m still only at the beginning.

This is a journey that takes courage and determination – remembering that the arc of the moral universe is long AND it bends toward social justice – let’s keep bending the arc in that direction as we remember and celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. and also as we pray and meditate on the guidance he left us.

May we pass this message on to the next generation as he

passed it to us. “Let justice roll down like waters, and  
righteousness like a might stream.”

MAY IT BE SO.