



“Changing the Face of the Enemy”: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Beloved Community

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“Love your enemies”: These words of Jesus, indeed Jesus himself, unsettled a young Martin Luther King, Jr. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”:¹ these words of King, indeed, King himself, unsettled me already back in the summer of 1969. They still do, and he still does. King and, through him, Jesus agitated me that summer about love and justice as I rocked for hours on the front porch in our family’s fourth-generation rocking chair. I had just finished my freshman year in college and one of my spring quarter courses had been a class in “Social Problems,” complete with immersion experiences in Detroit’s “black” culture. I aspired, awkwardly, to continue the immersion. First on my summer reading list were Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and the other essays in *Why We Can’t Wait*, and Malcolm X’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I took to that rocker every minute that I was not working my summer job. I was incapable of putting Martin and Malcolm down!

That same summer I also had become aware that Grandpa Simpson had been

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1963) 77.

Martin Luther King, Jr., begins with Jesus’ command to love the enemy and moves to an understanding that in the “beloved community” God is “changing the face of the enemy.” In that beloved community, where all are brought together in a way that changes all, true freedom is found.

a Klansman deep in the Appalachian hills of Kentucky's Cumberland Gap. In 1930, when my father was two years old and my Aunt Evelyn eleven, Grandpa defied his fellow Klansmen. At one of its meetings, the Klan had decided for some "reason" to tar and feather a black man in town named John Bingham. Grandpa left the meeting early, alerted Mr. Bingham, and hid him away. The Klan now had it in for Grandpa. That night the Ku Klux Klan burned a big cross on the hillside right above Grandpa's house, pronouncing the whole family *persona non grata* and projecting terror throughout the valley. Those flames still strike fear in Aunt Evelyn whenever she recalls the story. My father regularly reminded me of this incident as I grew up in the mid-1960s.

King discovered an entire way of life in Jesus' "Love your enemies," and he named that life "the beloved community."² First, I will trace King's focus on time and place that bound him, a minister of the gospel, for the beloved community. Second, I will look at King's embrace of Mahatma Gandhi's way of nonviolence as the key strategy for changing the face of the enemy and realizing the beloved community. Third, I will visit King's encounter with Black Power as a critical test of the beloved community, and finish by recalling two of his orations that have passed the bar of public truth.

TIED TO TIME, CALLED TO PLACE, AND BOUND FOR THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

On December 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a Montgomery city bus and was arrested. That arrest baptized King, the newest minister in town, into the public arena. He was elected to give the big speech at the December 5th mass meeting that would inaugurate the now-famous bus boycott. But, before that "miracle" would happen in Montgomery's usually dormant and quiescent Negro community, he faced "a new and sobering dilemma: How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?"³

King discovered the poignancy of the "now" in Rosa Parks's refusal. Actually, he borrowed the phrase "now is the time" from two local African Americans: E. D. Nixon, the layperson who had posted bond for Mrs. Parks, and Reverend L. Roy Bennett, president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance in Montgomery. Rhetoricians call such borrowing "voice merging."⁴ It is common practice among ministers who hear others use a phrase, often then to supplement it and fi-

²No one knows exactly when or how King came upon "the beloved community," a concept used by Josiah Royce, a Christian philosopher at Harvard University in the early twentieth century. See Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (1913; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

³Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (1986; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 430, 434. Page numbers in the text are from *A Testament of Hope*.

⁴See Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

nally make it their own, usually without crediting the originator, in order to share it freely with a wider audience.

And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [*thundering applause*] There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. (*Keep talking*) There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life’s July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. (*That’s right*) [*applause*] There comes a time. (*Yes sir, Teach*) [*applause continues*]⁵

King countered “the myth of time” with “the fierce urgency of now,” as he eventually phrased it (243). The myth of time alleges, “just wait; in some unknown future everything good will eventually work itself out.” King rejected this popular American laissez-faire doctrine of progress because “human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability” (270). Rather, Christians together become “co-workers with God...So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right” (270). For this reason King regularly echoed the words of the nineteenth-century British politician William Gladstone, “Justice delayed is justice denied” (186).

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King’s tie to time was ultimately rooted in the time-fullness and timeliness of his biblical faith. Already in the December 5th speech he was clear that because the Son of God is incarnated in time and because our Christian life together is deeply implicated in Jesus, then Christian witness and life is likewise time-full and timely. “If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. (*That’s right*) [*applause*] If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. (*Yes*) [*applause*]⁶”

King’s call to place developed gradually. He addressed this in his April 16, 1963, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Eight prominent liberal clergy, led by Episcopal Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter of Alabama, wrote an editorial in the *Birmingham News* calling King’s civil rights campaign in Birmingham both “unwise and untimely.” While the fierce urgency of now defies the accusation of “untimely,” how will he address the charge of “unwise,” which channeled the oft heard Southern white complaint that civil rights advocates are merely outside agitators and troublemakers?

⁵Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address to Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church” (1955), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 72.

⁶*Ibid.*, 73.

Officially, King, then a minister in Atlanta, came to Birmingham because he was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which operated in every Southern state, and the local affiliate had asked the national headquarters and its president to come. But there were greater reasons, which encompass an arc beginning with God's call. "Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here....Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid," alluding to Acts 16 (290). The arc ends in a famous rhetorical flurry of cosmic sociality.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (290)

Shortly after the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott King made "the beloved community" the watchword for his public theology of cosmic sociality.⁷ He seldom used the biblical phrase "kingdom of God," a surprise since he was so steeped in the biblical rhetoric of the black Christian church. Rather, he substituted "beloved community" for kingdom of God. Like the kingdom of God, the beloved community is an eschatological reality, God's own future arriving ahead of time in our present, remaking our hostility-filled communities. He believed himself bound for the beloved community and that his call was to bind the beloved community to America and the world. Above all, in the beloved community God is "changing the face of the enemy."⁸

LOVING ONE'S ENEMY THROUGH NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

Christ's own love incites the beloved community and exists as Christian love in the here and now. For King this love centered everything. "Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies."⁹ Love changes the face of three enemies: the face of the oppressed, the face of the oppressor, and the face of the oppressive system.

Loving one's enemies begins by confronting the hate response in the soul of the one oppressed. Hate destroys both the one hated and "distorts the personality of the hater."¹⁰ King also noted, "This is true in our international struggle" as well.¹¹ Love, on the other hand, "has within it a redemptive power," the power of the cross.¹² "He who loves is a participant in the being of God" (11).

Oppressed people deal with their oppression in three possible ways. First,

⁷See King, *A Testament of Hope*, 8, 12, 18, 25. In the mid- to late-1960s King often substituted "great world house" or "world-wide neighborhood" or "world-wide fellowship" for the beloved community (*ibid.*, 617–633).

⁸King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 38.

⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (1957), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 316.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 321.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 317.

¹²*Ibid.*, 321.

they may rise up against their oppressors with hatred and violence. This method ends in futility, because “violence begets violence” and creates more social problems than it solves (87). Still, King was “no doctrinaire pacifist” but rather embraced “a realistic pacifism” (39). He faced moral dilemmas with the prudence similarly needed within the Christian just-war tradition, which often must discern lesser evils. He noted that even Gandhi did not ever condemn the principle of violent self-defense per se. But the fine line that separates self-defensive violence from retaliatory violence is too easily transgressed (57). Furthermore, self-defensive violence does not provide a positive approach to get at the fears and conditions that produce violence in the first place (56).

Second, oppressed people may acquiesce, resigning themselves to perpetual oppression. But this response is ultimately immoral because King recognized that not to cooperate was a moral obligation. Third, oppressed people can respond by living in love. This is the more excellent way, and, according to King, the only moral way to deal with oppression. In this way oppressed peoples discover the redemptive power of love, rooted in Jesus’ cross, which brings in the beloved community.

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King gradually came to appreciate Mahatma Gandhi. By the end of the Montgomery bus boycott he had come to speak of “the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence” (447; also 12–40, 75–81). He was convinced: “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method” (17). People soon called him the “Negro Gandhi” and “Alabama’s Gandhi.”¹³ More than a method, however, Gandhi’s nonviolence “is ultimately a way of life that men live by because of the sheer morality of its claim” (17). As a way of life, nonviolence changes the face of the first enemy, the enemy within.

King condensed Gandhi’s method into six points (7–9, 17–20). First, nonviolent direct action is not passive or for cowards but requires courage. It is nonaggressive physically but dynamically aggressive spiritually; for “privileged groups rarely give up their privileges without strong resistance” (7). Therefore, “freedom is not given, it is won by struggle” (190). There is a nonviolent realism in King’s philosophy.

Second, nonviolent direct action seeks reconciliation, not the defeat of an adversary. The nonviolent resister seeks to win the opponent’s understanding and even friendship rather than to humiliate or defeat the opponent. Famously, King said, “The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is

¹³Clayborne Carson, introduction to *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 3, 19–20.

the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness” (8). King hardly ever referred to the white oppressor as enemy. Nonviolent resisters face opponents, not enemies, who themselves are also victims. Changing enemies into opponents and finally into friends changes the face of the second enemy, the human oppressor.

Third, nonviolent direct action is directed at removing evil forces, not at destroying persons who perpetrate evil deeds. The conflict is between justice and injustice. Injustice is the enemy to be defeated, not persons. When justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, this changes the face of the third enemy, the unjust system.

Fourth, nonviolent resisters willingly accept suffering for a cause, if necessary, but will never inflict suffering on others. Unearned suffering is redemptive. Because love bears suffering, love is neither idealistic nor sentimental. As Gandhi stressed:

Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood.... Things of fundamental importance to people are not secured by reason alone, but have to be purchased with their suffering.... Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears which are otherwise shut to the voice of reason. (cited by King, 18)

By 1960 King had been put in jail five times, had his home firebombed twice, had received nearly daily threats of death to him and his family, and had been the victim of a near-fatal stabbing. In 1968 he was, of course, assassinated. The suffering borne by nonviolent direct action, when necessary, is not an end in itself but a moral means to awaken the conscience of an oppressive adversary and of a wider passive public. “When a police dog buried his fangs in the ankle of a small child in Birmingham, he buried his fangs in the ankle of every American.”¹⁴

Fifth, nonviolent direct action avoids not only external physical violence but also the internal violence of the resister’s spirit. Retaliation and hatred set off chains of hate that destroy the soul of the oppressed. This “nobodiness” (293) introduced by oppression gets doubled in the nobodiness produced when the oppressed practice hatred. Hatred is that enemy within that only love can cast out. Oppressed souls will flourish when love possesses the center of life, gives birth to “the new Negro” (137), and gives rise to “somebodiness” (108).

Sixth, nonviolent direct action is based on the conviction that God’s universe is on the side of justice. King realized that many who are committed to nonviolent resistance find it difficult to believe in a personal God. But his own conviction did rest in a personal God, a conviction that was strengthened throughout his life. He regularly relied upon Jesus’ promise, “Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28), and confessed with St. Paul, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (42). Nevertheless, when speaking publicly

¹⁴King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 68.

he would often talk about “cosmic companionship” (9, 14, 20, 88). Or, he would frequently intone, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (88). Whether rooted in cosmic companionship or the arc of the moral universe or the promise of Jesus, “We shall overcome” became the anthem of the nonviolent direct action movement (52). Through nonviolence we “make a career of humanity” and live other-centered rather than self-centered lives (22). Nonviolent direct action did not originate in America but it surely “found its natural home in this land, where refusal to cooperate with injustice was an ancient and honorable tradition and where Christian forgiveness was written into the minds and hearts of good men.”¹⁵

TESTED BY BLACK POWER AND TRUED BY PUBLIC RECEPTION

The Black Power movement took hold after the attempted assassination of James Meredith in June 1966. Meredith had been the first African American to be admitted to the University of Mississippi at Oxford in 1962. On June 16, 1966, in Greenwood, Mississippi, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was arrested for the twenty-seventh time. Carmichael had had enough. “I ain’t going to jail no more! We want Black Power!” he shouted over and over again at a mass rally.¹⁶ Over and over again the crowd shouted back, “Black Power!” In Greenwood, civil rights marchers began singing “We Shall Overrun” instead of “We Shall Overcome,” and Black Power took hold.¹⁷

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King understood that the black community had had enough. But he believed that the Black Power movement was dyed in the stain of despair, inclined toward nihilism, and destined for isolation and separation. Finally, “[p]robably the most destructive feature of Black Power is its unconscious and often conscious call for retaliatory violence” (589). King held dearly to the effectiveness of nonviolence to bring the beloved community nearer.

The Black Power slogan introduced a crisis of semantics, argued King, and leaders must always attend to public rhetoric. He acknowledged the legitimacy of the denotative sense of “black power” but worried about its connotative sense. That is, Black Power denotes the legitimate psychological, economic, social, and political power that African Americans need in order to be shapers of their own lives, communities, and destinies as well as full participants in the American

¹⁵Ibid., 25.

¹⁶Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: 1965–1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 486.

¹⁷For King’s analysis of Black Power, see *A Testament of Hope*, 303–312, 569–597.

dream. King worried, however, that Black Power connoted black dominance rather than black equality to the broad public of Americans, both black and white.

Initially, King defined power as “the ability to achieve purpose” (577). This standard modern conception views power as a neutral tool or instrument to achieve purpose, whatever the purpose might be. King usually defined the moral purposes as love and justice. In this conception, however, instrumental power itself remains, somehow, amoral and thus neutral, depending only on which purposes it is used for.

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introduce the morally charged shared-power world that
anticipates King’s beloved community”*

At one point King went beyond the modern conceptual captivity of amoral instrumental power. During an analysis of liberation and integration King introduced the notion of a shared-power world. By doing so he reconceptualized power in closer concert with the beloved community. “On the one hand, integration is true intergroup, interpersonal living. On the other hand, it is the mutual sharing of power” (594). If we change the word “of” to “as,” then the very notion, practice, and reality of power comes within a closer moral orbit to the beloved community. Mutual sharing as power and power as mutual sharing introduce the morally charged shared-power world that anticipates King’s beloved community.

Indeed, nonviolent direct action was sorely tested by the rhetoric of Black Power. Still, nonviolent direct action has been more surely tried by the public reception of nonviolent rhetoric. King brought America into a closer fit with the beloved community most famously through his oratory.¹⁸ We will look briefly at two enduring and endearing samples.

Our first sample comes from “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” White liberals, clergy even, had little experience with the devastating consequences of racism. King’s dilemma was how to integrate white liberals into the African American oppression. Rhetoricians call what King accomplished “voice merging” and social psychologists call it “social perspective taking.” Take note how the last clause of the Birmingham letter’s nonviolent speech entices his white readers to imaginatively become the Negro “you.”

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Ne-

¹⁸See Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); and Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

gro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentment; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. (292–293)

These ten careful vignettes accomplish a social merging that changes the face of the enemy and initiates beloved community.

Our second sample comes from “I Have a Dream.” King was all about integration, not simply desegregation (118). But the common assumption of his day was that integration merely meant the inclusion of African Americans into America, into white America. While his dream does imagine African American inclusion in America, take note how the speech ends.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” (220)

When King's nonviolent oratory brings the beloved community near, white Americans likewise get integrated into the spiritual field of African American community. When so integrated, thank God Almighty, we are free at last! ⊕

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