

Opening the Doors to the Beloved Community<sup>1</sup>  
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This weekend we celebrate the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He told us: "All life is interrelated. No nation or individual is independent; we are interdependent. ... As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I possess a billion dollars. As long as millions of people are inflicted with debilitating diseases..., I can never be totally healthy even if I receive a perfect bill of health from Mayo Clinic. Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."<sup>2</sup> Dr. King hoped and worked for a world in which all people have what they need, and are able to be what they ought to be, and he called it the Beloved Community.

Readings from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One: From April 4, 1967, "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break the Silence"<sup>3</sup>

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.

Two: From "Where Do We Go From Here?"<sup>4</sup>

"The problem indicates that our emphasis must be twofold: We must create full employment, or we must create incomes. People must be made consumers by one method or the other. Once they are placed in this position, we need to be concerned that the potential of the individual is not wasted. New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available... Work of this sort could be enormously increased, and we are likely to find that the problem of housing, education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished. The poor, transformed into purchasers, will do a great deal on their own to alter housing decay. ...

The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement. ..."

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2 From "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," address to Morehouse College June 1959

3 From [\*Beyond Vietnam-- A Time to Break the Silence\*](#)

4 August 1967, the Rev. Dr. King spoke to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in a speech called [\*Where Do We Go From Here?\*](#)

## Sermon

The "Beloved Community" is a term that was first used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the philosopher Josiah Royce, who became one of the 68 founders of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the United States in 1915. Forty years later, this idea was expanded and popularized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

The Beloved Community grows out of the belief that all of humanity is connected, part of one family. When one part of the family is suffering, the other parts of the family cannot be at ease. According to the website of the King Center in Atlanta, "The Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood."<sup>5</sup>

We might think that such a vision is merely a utopian dream... for when has our world known such peaceful and inclusive cooperation? But for Dr. King, the Beloved Community was the only goal compatible with the essential truth that we are all one family. Therefore, his vision was not utopian, but rather a kind of vision that could guide our everyday actions in order to become a possible future. The everyday actions which he believed could lead us to the Beloved Community were the philosophy and practice of non-violence.

The fundamental principles of Dr. King's philosophy of nonviolence were described in an article in *Christian Century* magazine, in 1957.<sup>6</sup> The principles include these five:

1. Nonviolence is not for cowards, but requires courage; The method is passive physically, but active mentally and emotionally and spiritually. At its root is resistance to injustice, not acquiescence.
2. Nonviolence does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his or her friendship and understanding. King wrote, "The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness."
3. Nonviolent action is directed against evil, not against the persons who are caught in the forces of evil.
4. Nonviolence avoids not only external violence, but also internal violence of spirit. It is based on the principle of love. "To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world," King wrote. "Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethics of love to the center of our lives." He goes on to explain that he is not talking about romantic or affectionate love, but agape love—that redeeming spirit of good will toward all.
5. Finally, nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. For Dr. King, this faith was rooted in his religious convictions, that all people

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thekingcenter.org/ProgServices/Default.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," reprinted in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, p. 5-9.

are the children of one God, and loved by God. But he also pointed out that this trust in the power of justice did not require a belief in a personal God.<sup>7</sup> It might also arise out of a heartfelt awareness of the unity of all people, or the interconnected web of all existence. It is this faith that the truth of the universe is on our side, that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation, and continue in the struggle through the dark times before the victory is assured.

In 1956, Dr. King said, in a speech following the announcement of the U.S. Supreme Court Decision desegregating the busses of Montgomery, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men."<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of our very divided nation, these words can be hard to hear. Perhaps, in the aftermath of the shootings in Arizona last week, we can understand some measure of what it meant to the people in the civil rights struggle to imagine being reconciled to the white segregationists. For certainly the violence and the hateful rhetoric in those days was much greater than we face today. But think about being reconciled to inflammatory Glenn Beck style hate mongers, or Wall Street speculators who wreak havoc on the economic well being of millions of people. Our natural inclination is to be angry, to hate those who hurt us, and to be repelled from connection to them. Yet Dr. King was asking people in his time to risk their lives for the dignity of all people, and to include in their hearts even those who were fighting against that dignity.

Poet and novelist, Alice Walker, talks about how impossible his vision felt, especially after he died. She wrote "Martin Luther King had asked us to do something really hard. Many people felt he had asked us to do something impossible. He had asked us to embrace nonviolence as a way of life. When he died by the gun, for many, many people, in the Movement and out of it, there was a feeling of release. We can't do it, many felt; we can't live as nonviolently as Martin Luther King, Jr., did... It was shocking to feel this. At the same time, it was completely understandable. I went through a period of being afflicted by horrible fantasies: of blowing up terrorists. Members of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen Councils, racist fanatics of all kinds who daily tormented and harassed us."<sup>9</sup>

And yet, Dr. King was asking them, and us, to break the cycle of hate. To be guided by love. Walker wrote of the grief that swept over her, and so many others, especially in the South, when Dr. King was killed. And yet, hidden in the grief, was something more miraculous.

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7 "The Power of Nonviolence," reprinted in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 13-14.

8 Quoted at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/ProgServices/Default.aspx>

9 Alice Walker, "How It Feels to Know Someone Died for You: Living with the Voice of the Beloved," in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, (The New Press, 2006), p. 169.

"Even in our deepest sorrow, the daily palpable ache of missing him, which never seemed to soften or to go away, we discovered a tender, radiant certainty that made some wretched, bewildered, stunned and stupefied part of us begin, almost, to smile. We knew, never not to know, that he had died for us. We knew we had been seen, held precious and dear beyond pain or price. Or sacrifice. We knew we had been completely loved." She goes on to say, "I firmly believe that there is no wholeness for a people, no promised land in view, until this happens. A challenging thought. His offering of himself, in love and death, was a forerunner of the promised land he would, at the end of his life, offer us."<sup>10</sup>

I was deeply moved by this testimony from Alice Walker—how personally she had experienced the inclusive love of this great man. I was too young and far away to really know what he was like, to feel it personally, and yet, his life of love has shaped my life, too, in so many ways. His deep belief in the dignity of a people considered by many to be less than fully human; his enduring expression of hope and confidence in their capacity to create transformation. That hope and confidence reverberated through the edges of our world, and also changed how I saw the hierarchies that manifested themselves in my own life.

He was standing on the side of the ones who had been left out—the ones on the bottom. Now, I had heard similar words repeated many times in the gospel readings in church on Sundays. How often I had heard that Jesus had said, "the last shall be first," and "so long as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." But now I could see what that might actually look like, lived out in our modern society.

Near the end of Dr. King's life, he was especially looking at the economic implications of the beloved community. He was organizing for a Poor People's Campaign. "He intended to dramatize the suffering of the nation's poor by bringing them to the capital. Poor people [of all races and colors] would live together on the National Mall - the long strip of land between the U.S. Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial - and engage in widespread civil disobedience."<sup>11</sup> He was challenging the status-quo of capitalism, in a way which is still unacceptable in our society. And many people in his day called him a Communist. He countered that he wasn't following Marx, but the gospel of Jesus.

But before the Poor People's Campaign could be carried out, he was assassinated. In the midst of their grief, the other organizers went forward, but the encampment of 8000 people was largely ignored by Congress and the press. It ended after several rainy and muddy and discouraging weeks, in June of 1968.

On the MLK holiday, we often hear about the early speeches of Dr. King. We hear about the bus boycott, and integration of the lunch counters, and the dream of racial equality. But we rarely hear about his campaign for economic justice, or his opposition to the Vietnam war. Poverty in our country has not gotten better, but worse.

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<sup>10</sup> Alice Walker, op.cit. p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.poorpeoplescampaignppc.org/King-apos-s-Last--March.html>

In 1968, King said, about ending poverty, "Now, our country can do this. John Kenneth Galbraith said that a guaranteed annual income could be done for about twenty billion dollars a year. And I say to you today, that if our nation can spend thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight an unjust, evil war in Vietnam, and twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their own two feet right here on earth..."<sup>12</sup>

In our day, the U.S. Government is spending more than \$150 billion dollars a year on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,<sup>13</sup> and the idea of ending poverty is considered even more radical than in Dr. King's day. Right now, in the U.S. the divide between the wealthiest and the poorest is the largest it has been since 1928.

According to Robert Reich, there is a Big Lie going around right now, "that our economic problems are due to a government that's too large, and therefore the solution is to shrink it." He writes, "The truth is our economic problems stem from the biggest concentration of income and wealth at the top since 1928, combined with stagnant incomes for most of the rest of us. The result: Americans no longer have the purchasing power to keep the economy going at full capacity. Since the debt bubble burst, most Americans have had to reduce their spending; they need to repay their debts, can't borrow as before, and must save for retirement..."<sup>14</sup>

According to U.S. Census data released this past fall, "The top-earning 20 percent of Americans - those making more than \$100,000 each year - received 49.4 percent of all income generated in the U.S." The bottom 20 percent, those who fell below the poverty line, received only 3.4 percent of all the income. "That ratio of 14.5-to-1 was an increase from 13.6 in 2008 and nearly double a low of 7.69 in 1968."<sup>15</sup>

If we are all one family, how can we tolerate an economic structure in which the divide between rich and poor is growing ever wider. That is the true challenge of Dr. King, for those of us who care about justice and love today.

Last March, Glenn Beck said that the churches who preach social justice are just using code words for communism and Nazism. Later, he clarified that to mean "redistribution of wealth." But here's the thing. That is exactly what Dr. King was dreaming about. That's why they tried to paint him as a Communist. But Christian churches for centuries, when they have been true to the message of Jesus, have been speaking up for sharing the wealth with all people. Instead, we have government policies which have had the effect of redistributing wealth from the poorest people up to the wealthiest people in America.

Our new governor Paul LePage, when he is not insulting the important work of the NAACP,<sup>16</sup> speaks

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12 August 1967, in a speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference called [\*Where Do We Go From Here?\*](#)

13 [http://useconomy.about.com/od/usfederalbudget/f/War\\_on\\_Terror\\_Facts.htm](http://useconomy.about.com/od/usfederalbudget/f/War_on_Terror_Facts.htm)

14 <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/01/04-11>

15 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/28/income-gap-widens-census-\\_n\\_741386.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/28/income-gap-widens-census-_n_741386.html)

16 On January 14th, when asked why he was not attending any MLK celebrations, which governors of the state of Maine have been doing for years, he said "the NAACP can kiss my butt." We fervently hope the dialogue will improve!

about getting rid of regulations that hinder businesses. Now, I haven't read all the regulations out there, and I am sure there are probably some that might be merely cumbersome. But, I ask, what is the purpose of government regulations? Properly, the purpose is to find balance—to rein in greed and corruption so that the wealth that is created by a community benefits everyone in that community. Regulations protect the common wealth—the air we all breathe, the water we all drink, the minerals that are found in the ground, the soil that grows the food we all eat. These don't belong to one small group of people. A country's laws determine how this common wealth will be shared.

When the divide between rich and poor grows wider and wider, everyone suffers, and democracy becomes impossible. The economic and political hardiness of the US came from a strong middle class—and that requires access to education, opportunity, decent paying jobs, and affordable health care. It makes me sad to realize that we could choose to use the resources of our nation to make sure that all people had the things they truly need. But we don't. When most elected officials look at ending the huge deficits of our government, they don't even talk about the billions being poured into wars. The messages that Dr. King was trying to bring to us over 40 years ago, are even more applicable—and just as challenging—to our world today.

I have to believe that the way of nonviolence is still the only way to get to the Beloved Community. Even though the road seems muddy and impassable. Even though the loudest voices in the commons are the voices of greed and self-interest. Because it is still true that we are all one family. If anything, we are now more aware of just how interdependent we are—with our world wide communication, and interlocking international economies. The situation of our brothers and sisters across the world is more visible than ever before. As King said, and it is more true than ever, "We must learn to live together as brothers [and sisters], or we will perish together as fools."<sup>17</sup>

For hope, I come back to the words of Alice Walker. She spoke about how Dr. King's love was a power that carried forward from his death, that brought strength and courage into her heart. She writes: "Remember who we are. We are the people seen and loved. All of us. As you know, Martin Luther King, Jr., never left anyone outside of his heart. Not even those who jailed and tortured him. We are people worthy of generosity, passionate advocacy, abiding loyalty and love. We are rich enough to offer these things to others."<sup>18</sup>

And so, in the midst of the conflict and trouble of our age, may we find the strength and courage to be practitioners of love. In the midst of selfishness and greed, may we find generosity and vision. In the midst of rancor and division, may we remember that we are all one people. May we behold and believe in the possibility of Beloved Community, and work to open the doors that all may enter there in.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. (MLK)

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17 Speech in St. Louis, Missouri, March 22, 1964.

18 Alice Walker, Op. Cit., p. 181.