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TRUTH IN LOVE

Nonviolence or Nonexistence: *Themes from MLK's 'I've Been to the Mountaintop'*

By Parris J. Baker
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America is the beneficiary of a tremendous gift found in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday and legacy we celebrate today as a national holiday.

Beyond all his extraordinary achievements, such as being awarded the 1964 Noble Peace Prize for his unwavering commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, King's gift is his legacy of a life dedicated to serving others. Born on Jan. 15, 1929, Rev. King lived and died in the pursuit of life and liberty for the subjugated, the poor and broken in spirit, and those who were weary from the weight and burden of oppression. He was truly a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness.

Almost 56 years ago, on Wednesday April 3, 1968, King gave a provocative oration at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee on behalf of the city's striking sanitation workers. It was titled, strikingly and historically, "I've Been to the Mountaintop." His speech, delivered extemporaneously, was a prescient warning to both the Mason Temple congregation and to the nation:

Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, they can no longer just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.



As our nation is confronted with the cruel and vitriolic spike in violence, with the threats of tyranny, and timidity, to remain listless on the sidelines, silently watching the demolition of democracy is to choose to align oneself directly or indirectly, intentionally, or unintentionally with the tyrants, the traitors, and renegades. To bear witness to insurrectionists, to weak-willed, window-dressing officers of the United States, and of those

individuals who ignore or reject their sworn allegiance to the Constitution and not engage in any direct action that attempts to ameliorate the menacing ecological condition is to behave irresponsibly.

King also helped us to better understand the behavior of our silent bystanders by a comparison with the priest or the Levite mentioned in Luke 10: 25-37:[1]

One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" The man answered, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind." And "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road." By chance, a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, "Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here."

"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

A summary of the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and the subsequent parable used by Jesus to answer the “love thy neighbor” question can best be understood by first examining the apparent avoidance by the priest and the Levite of helping the “half dead” Jewish man. Second, it considers the social-religious hierarchal order of the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan. Jesus began his discourse by re-establishing the principles of love found in the Mosaic and Levitical Laws.[2]

First, the priest and the Levite, who were coming from a synagogue in Jerusalem, were clearly conscientious law-abiding members of the religious community. The role expectation of “love thy neighbor” was inherent in the role definitions of their status as a priest and a Levite. Second, Jesus reminds the parable listeners of the priestly order within the religious community by beginning with the priest and then the Levite. In the traditional tripartite role demarcation, after the priest and the Levite, the role of the pharisee or religious laity should have been mentioned. Incredibly, Jesus substitutes the role of the pharisee with an improbable person, a Samaritan.

For a variety of religious, political, and social reasons, Samaritans were “a basket of deplorables,”[3] despised and ostracized by the Jewish community. It was therefore unthinkable to have the Samaritan presented as the protagonist in the parable and not the priest or the Levite. Given the religious class distinctions purposely identified by Jesus, one might have expected that the protagonist to be the “Jewish man who was attacked by bandits.”

Masterfully, Jesus does not delineate or define neighbor as the person in need of love but the person who, when presented with opportunity to give love, gave love as the neighbor.[4] The Jewish legal scholar acknowledges a deeper insight of the parable and revelation of Leviticus 19:18 when he answers the restated question posed by Jesus, “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” The scribe responded, “The one who showed him mercy.” Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

[1] Luke 10: 25-37 (New Living Translation)

[2] Deuteronomy 6: 4-6 “Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.^[a] ⁵ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. ⁶ And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. (New Living Translation). Leviticus 19: 18-19 (New Living Translation) “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. “You must obey all my decrees.

[3] Hilliary Clinton "To just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the 'basket of deplorables' As a part of her fundraiser speech delivered on September 9, 2016, at Cipriani Restaurant, New York City, NY.

[4] Michel Gourgues. The Priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan Revisited: A Critical Note on Luke 10: 31-35. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 117/4 (Winter, 1998) pp. 709-713. Retrieved on October 14, 2023 [Here](#)



King also rejected the cultural and religious exegesis of the parable and plainly stated, “I’m going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It’s possible that those men were afraid.” He posited that the focus of the priest and the Levite was directed to answering their introspective question, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question. ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”

King personalizes the parable and applies the question to himself:

That’s the question before you tonight. Not, if I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job? Not, if I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor? The question is not, if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is, if I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? That’s the question.

On Thursday April 4, 1968, while leaving the Lorraine Hotel, that modern-day Samaritan, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. James Cone^[5] would later assert that we need more theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and King; men who have the courage to speak to the evils of white supremacy and the architects of injustice. Men who are not afraid to address white supremacy as a moral evil and a contradiction to our humanity. As we reflect on King’s birth, remember him as he requested:^[6]

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say on that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness.

[5] James H. Cone. *Black Theology & Black Power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books (2018). Dr. was a Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology and one of the founders of Black Liberation Theology.

[6] Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Drum Major Instinct*. Excerpt from his sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA (February 4, 1968)

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