

The Rev. Luke Selles

The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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“I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I reflect on my own life, I have trouble coming up with a list of enemies. There are the people who blare their horns at me at intersections as soon as the light turns green. There are the people who look at me with confusion which turns to disgust when I tell them my name. There are of course the bullies, the ones who have tried to make my life miserable, to make me feel excluded so that they could feel they belonged. But at the end of the day, in my position of relative privilege in this society, there is little that any of those people have done, or could have done really, to hurt me, at least without my permission. My permission to feel cowed, excluded, unloveable. Up to this point, I have been protected because of my socioeconomic status, my race, and my education from true acts of hate and violence.

But now, in spite of my own peace-loving nature, my dislike of conflict and drama, I know that I am numbered as someone who, not because of my politics or anything really interesting about me, but because of my identity, my joyful declaration of self, I have been drawn into an inflamed, state-sanctioned rhetoric. In case you haven’t seen it in the news, trans and non-binary people have been cast as ideologues whose sole intention is destroying all that is good and noble in American society. At best, we are considered victims of this perverse, dangerous ideology, which itself has been declared an enemy of the American people, of American values.

So, whether I like it or not, whether I choose to engage those news headlines or not, I do have enemies now. Many of us here today have enemies now – not because we want to live in strife, not because of anything we’ve really done – but because we exist, unapologetically, as we are. Because we are handy scapegoats for this moment of uncertainty, this moment of power-grabbing, this moment of hate. Or because we resist these distortions and demand truth. Because we denounce tyranny and violent, unprovoked acts of hate against our neighbors. Many of us have become, it would seem, almost overnight, enemies of the new American state.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches us to love, not just our neighbors or our friends or our families – Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us. Of all his teachings, this may be the most widely ignored by Christians, even those of us who loudly proclaim God as Love. And this is understandable – this teaching is why some people throughout history have pathologized Jesus, declaring him and his followers insane. It's natural, after all, to hate those who hate you, to render evil for evil. How can we here at St. Martin's live out this most difficult of teachings, especially in this moment in our nation, our world?

Unfamiliar as I am with having enemies, let alone being an enemy of the state, I turn to the witness and preaching of a much more seasoned preacher and activist, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose legacy we honor today and tomorrow with acts of service. Central to King's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, which he has come to represent, is his commitment to Jesus' teaching to "love our enemies."

In his sermon titled, "Love Your Enemies," delivered at Dexter Ave Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1957, King begins with a directive to self-examination. What this teaching is asking us to do, he says, is to enter into a spiritual transformation. It is a call on us to see in every human being the image of God. Just as we have been assured of our own belovedness and inherent worth, we must see that in others, regardless of their behavior or any measure of worthiness that we can use – God has knit each of us in God's own image. King also points out the Greek word for love used here is agape. This is not a romantic, affectionate, or brotherly love – but a divinely-inspired love, one that recognizes and honors divine worth. We love our enemies then, not because we want to, or that it feels natural to us. Not because it gives us anything per se, but because it is an act of obedience to the divine will of God. As our Gospel lesson concludes: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." We love our enemies because God loves them. God who loves us, even in our own flaws and rebellions, also loves our enemies.

But why would God, who is divine, order us who are creatures of flesh and bone to love those who can and desperately want to hurt us? And how can we possibly resist our own instincts and gut reactions?

King clarifies that this love we are called to is not the same as liking—it's not based on our feelings or sentiments, but it is our choice, our choice to refuse, even when given the opportunity, to defeat any individual. To defeat any person caught up in the system themselves, even if they have declared war on us either through complicity with or active participation in evil systems, because that person is still our neighbor, according to Jesus' teaching.

King declares that, "When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems." And this is because, he says, "hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe." Jesus is teaching us a new way of understanding Justice, not a retributive one – not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but a restorative one – a justice that is meted out with mercy and agape Love. We are each called on to break the chain of hate and violence with our decision, our commitment to love those who certainly do not love us.

And this is principally because hatred has nothing of God in it, and so to hate is to risk losing sight of love and truth and goodness altogether. Hatred, King says, doesn't just destroy the hated, but it destroys the "very structure of the personality of the hater." Hate distorts the truth, makes ugly the beautiful and the beautiful ugly, all in the name of its own agenda. "When you start hating anybody," King says, "it destroys the very center of your creative response to life and the universe." But, if we reject hate and hold onto love, he says, "at the very root of love is the power of redemption," the power of our love to redeem those who hate us.

King says we have three choices in responding to systemic hatred. First, we can choose hatred and violence in kind, but he warns that this path means we risk corroding our very sense of self: we risk becoming the hater as well as the hated. Second, we choose resignation, to acquiesce to the hateful system, but he declares that only through non-cooperation with evil will we resist hatred and preserve our sense of love and truth. Finally, he says, we can choose non-violent mass resistance.

We may have a few reactions to this – some of us may say: Jesus in his lifetime wasn't trying to displace the Roman Empire. This has actually been subject to some different interpretations, but I think Jesus did resist Roman oppression, but he came for something more than that – he came to give himself – his teaching, his friendship, his love, and his life for us, as Emmanuel, God with us. He came so that we may enter the Kingdom of God. Some others may say: Jesus wasn't non-violent, didn't he flip over tables and destroy the property of the exploitative money-changers in the Temple? And yes, that is true – perhaps there are ways to be violent without perpetuating hatred, although that seems a slippery slope.

But, friends, I think in our own spiritual wrestlings with hatred, we must begin, as King advises, with a look within. We must begin with work to understand and conquer our own fear. Our fear of change, of retaliation, of difference – whatever it may be. Because I believe fear is the fertile ground from which hatred in this nation has sprung. Once we have confronted our fear, we can pray for the courage to love, to love even those who hate us. Amen.