

A Different Kind of Hero  
The Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.  
*Exodus 3:7-12, Psalm 77:11-20, Luke 6:27-36*  
January 17, 2010, 9:00 a.m.  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good morning! Welcome to our celebration of the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr.! It's wonderful to have you with us! It's especially great to have the children and all our young people in church this today for this special, music-filled service to brighten our spirits in the depth of winter.

I'd like to begin by asking: what do you think of when you think about heroes? Is this someone who rescues others from dangers? Someone brave? Someone who puts other people first, ahead of him- or herself? Someone who is willing to risk their life for what he or she believe in? Are they people who fight for something bigger than themselves – like an ideal? (For instance, Superman fights for truth, justice and the American Way.)

There are different kinds of heroes. Many of the most popular ones sound something like this. Super-heroes certainly tend to fit this picture. How do they fight? How do they take on the bad guys, as fight for justice or for freedom or for truth? Unless they are Superman, and are invulnerable to attack, the comic book characters use violence. They pick up a sword, a rope, a gun. In the movies, a few years back, it was a bit of a joke to watch the competition to see which action hero could get the biggest gun. In each movie that came out, the hero had a bigger weapon.

This morning we remember a different kind of hero. Martin Luther King, Jr., rejected violence as a way to solve problems. After being threatened so viciously on the phone, that he truly feared for his life he refused to strike back. After actually being attacked with knives and guns and bombs and dogs and fire hoses, he continued to reject violence. After facing true evil, he put his faith ever more deeply in God's love.

Martin Luther King knew that violence only breeds more violence. A third-generation Baptist pastor, Dr. King was steeped in the Christian tradition. While a student in seminary in Rochester New York, he came to be convinced that Jesus's command (that we just heard) to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you, was not only possible, but was in fact the very best way to fight. Learning from the great civil rights champion of India, Mohandas Gandhi, he discovered that if you want to change people, if you want to transform lives and change the world, he believed, you do with non-violence. In India, he found that the former oppressor and the oppressed lived side by side without bitterness, anger or resentment, but with cooperation, mutual respect, and friendship.

Now, non-violence is not passive. It is active. It can even be aggressive. As practiced first by Gandhi and then adapted by King in this country, it calls for great courage. It asks the oppressed people stand up for themselves. Standing together, in coordinated efforts, the people refuse to submit to unjust systems, to bad laws and evil practices and unholy traditions that kept the people down. It pushes the bad laws, the evil practices, and the unholy traditions into the light where everyone can see them as they are. It brings public shame to the villains, so that they are forced to change their ways.

This way of nonviolence grows out of Jesus's teaching that we love one another. Dr. King was very clear that he was not asking anyone to love their enemies in the way of sentimental feeling. Instead, he taught that while we have only one word – love – to talk about this, the Greeks have three: eros, philia, and agapé. Eros is romantic love; philia is brotherly love of friendship; agapé is the highest form of love, which King described as “understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all. . . . It is the love of God working in the minds of men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on this level,” King says, “you begin to love men not because they are likable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them and here we love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed the person does.”<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine fighting with love? It seems almost impossible. But this is what Martin Luther King showed us we could do. With the power of faith, like Moses who trusted not in himself but that God would be there beside him, trusting in the God or that the movement of the universe is toward justice, this man courageously showed us that we can change the world with love. In 1965, Dr. King's efforts were rewarded with the Voting Rights Act, which cleared the way for all to vote without any test beyond citizenship. 43 years later this country voted an African American into the highest office in the country, arguably the most powerful position in the world, the president of the United States of America.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was many things: a man of faith, a teacher, a leader, a prophet, and a great patriot, who believed deeply in the potential of our country. In 1958, he wrote about his work: “The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community. A boycott [or other act of nonviolence] is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption.”<sup>2</sup> He didn't just fight for justice for the oppressed. He fought for justice for everybody, even his oppressor.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a hero. He was, perhaps, an unusual hero for our country. His weapon of choice was love. For this he is considered a saint, and is included in our calendar of saints.

*May God give us the grace of the clarity and the courage and the faith of the saints, like Dr. King, that we in our own day, may seek to serve and grow God's beloved community. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Power of Nonviolence (1958)” as printed in *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed The World*, San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp. 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 30-31.