

“Strength to Love”

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Text: 1 John 4:7-21

I was teaching at a conference a few years ago. I had been hired by the a denomination to talk about the church growth and the changes that needed to take place in order for liberal churches to be relevant in a new generation.

So, I talked about how the world has grown very diverse. In younger generations, white people are a minority, but the church has not reflected this demographic shift. Liberal denominations still tend to be mostly white. I was agitating for our denominations to dismantle our systemic racism, start more diverse and multi-cultural congregations.

It had been a long conference—about 5 days of teaching from 9:00 am to 5 pm. I was talking with a group of people who were white. I mean, I didn’t give them a census questionnaire on the way in or anything, but from what I could see, that’s what it looked like. When we spoke about diversity, it was the end of the day, and I slipped and referred to African-Americans as “them.”

A white woman got up in the crowd and she was infuriated because I had used the term “them.” Now, I understand where she was coming from. When we are talking about racism, it is important that we don’t use terms like “us” and “them.” They are considered “othering” terms, and so much of fighting racism is understanding that we are siblings, that we are united in our struggle.

I stood there, nodding, taking it all in. I was also feeling exhausted, humiliated, and ashamed. I wondered if she had just discredited me enough to dismantle everything that I had been talking about for the last four days. We wanted the same thing, but it felt as if her comments were meant to completely discredit me. There was really no way to save face in the situation.

This phenomenon in activist communities has a name. It’s “call-out culture.” Basically, people look for anytime you make a mistake, or they like to point out any way that you might be more privileged, and they discredit you. On the Internet, you might be “cancelled,” which means that people no longer respect you. Sometimes it happens for good reasons. Sometimes people are unfair.

When I began anti-racism work, I was terrified of that exact situation. I was so worried about saying something wrong. I didn’t want to hurt people of color, so I thought that I could just not talk about it. I could turn away from it.

But we cannot just turn away. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [humans] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

In light of this, it felt amazing to re-read King’s words this week. At different times in my life, I have appreciated different things about King’s work—for he was an amazing theologian, a great organizer, and a non-violent philosopher, but the thing at this moment that stood out for me was his commitment to the beloved community. For King, the beloved community meant that **love is strong, that love is non-violent, and that the end goal of the struggle is always reconciliation.**

Perhaps it is because of the shame and embarrassment that I have felt for making mistakes and being called out, but hearing King talk about love was powerful. It reminded me of this letter from John, “Beloved, let us love one another.” He knew what community ought to look like.

First, strong, courageous love remained central to King’s work. Love was not a weak, fluffy feeling that looks the other way when something terrible is happening. It takes strength to love, courage to love. It makes us better humans. So, King would constantly encourage people to love the segregationist. Which did not mean that they should turn their backs on their sins. But it meant that they should stand up to them because they loved them. King very much believed that we should love our enemies, that racism was hurting white men and white women, it was hurting our souls, and that the loving thing to do was to make sure that all of humanity could flourish.

Think about it. If you’re a parent, and you love your child, you are not going to want your child to be a bully and hit other children. You know that bullies tend to be miserable people. They hit, and violence escalates. Violence gives birth to violence. We don’t want the people we love to live in that sort of world. In the same way, King took the teachings of Jesus and instructed people to love their enemies, to love the segregationist. But this love was a creative force, a strong force, that had its source in God’s love for us.

Second, love included non-violent resistance. King learned from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Some look at King’s non-violent resistance, they see the photos of protestors who were dressed up in their Sunday best, being pummeled by the spray of fire hoses. They saw the dogs growling barking, and say that non-violent resistance is the same thing as not doing anything.¹ But that is simply not the case.

¹ One of the most powerful and important critiques of King’s work has come from Ta-nehisi Coates, especially in his book, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

I read a great example of non-violent resistance from Walter Wink.² He told a story of a boy who rode the bus. And there was a big kid in the back who hassled him endlessly. The boy was little, he had sinus problems, and his nose was often running all over the place. And this bigger kid kept calling him names and threatening to beat him up.

The little boy was strong and courageous though. So, one day, in the middle of this taunting, the smaller boy stood up, looked at his tormentor straight in the eyes, he wiped his hand on his nose, and held it out to the bully. He said, “Hi, I don’t think we’ve ever met. My name is Matthew.”

The older boy’s eyes got huge, he backed up, and Matthew kept holding out his hand, until the bigger boy was cowering in a corner. That is non-violent resistance.

Third, the beloved community meant that in the end, we were looking for restoration. King didn’t want to destroy those who didn’t believe in what he had to say. He wanted to become brothers and sisters.

Oh, how we need to hear this right now! It reminds me of Ruby Bridges, the story of the little African-American girl who was six years old, and she was in Louisiana, and she was called upon to de-segregate her school. So every morning, this tiny girl would get up, and she would put on her dress and she would walk through a crowd of white women and men who were yelling at her, calling her names. Screaming hateful things at this tiny child.

And Robert Coles was her counselor, and so he would find ways to talk to Ruby about what was happening. He would ask her to draw pictures. And so she would draw pictures of herself, tiny, with broken bones. She didn’t have any broken bones, but that was how she felt, having to face these crowds every morning. And she would talk with her mother about how to handle it and what to say.

One day, Coles noticed that Ruby was muttering something on the way to school. He asked her what she was saying, and Ruby Bridges responded, that she was looking at those faces, filled with hatred and violence and she was saying, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”³

That is the sort of strong that leads to beloved community.

This sort of cut and burn mentality is strong in our culture. We can point to a lot of culprits. Cable news pundits who incite us to fear one another. Social media algorithms that encourage discord and fighting. The inability for us to be able to talk with one another, even in our own families, without demonizing or degrading one another.

² Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Fortress Press, 2003).

³ Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

In all of this, we can learn from King. We can learn that love takes courage and strength. We learn that non-violent resistance is not only ethical, it reflects the teachings of Jesus, and it's wise. We learn that the end goal is not cutting someone off. It is not shaming them or embarrassing them, and "calling them out." It is not about making someone feel badly about their privilege or their power. In the end, the goal is reconciliation, forgiveness, and working together. It is about building the beloved community.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.