

Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Beloved Community

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Gandhi-King Conference on Peacemaking: Building the Beloved Community

Memphis, TN

Oct 26-27, 2007

It is by now a truism to say that the beloved community was one of the central elements of Martin Luther King's life and work. Many scholars have recognized the importance of community for King. (For example see Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Search for the Beloved Community, Valley Forge PA: Judson Press, 1974; Ira Zepp, The Social Vision of Martin Luther King Jr, Brooklyn NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989; Walter Fluker, They Looked for a City, NY: University Press of America, 1989) When Ira Zepp comments that "King's devotion to the realization of the beloved community was his primary goal. It was the organizing principle of his life and around which all of his thought and activity centered," (207) he expresses a singular moment in the study of King's thought. Zepp mentions several of King's comments to illustrate this point (207-208). Reflecting on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King informs us as to its true goal. "But we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end in itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his sense of superiority. But the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community" (Testament 140). For King, the end also contains the means by which it will arrive. "Only through nonviolence can

Presented at the 2007 Gandhi-King Conference on Peacemaking
October 26-27, 2007 • Memphis, TN
www.GandhiKingConference.org

this goal [integration] be attained, for the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community” (Stride 220). Where we are going and how we get there encapsulates King’s ethics and offers a vision of what we might become.

I shall examine this vision through three main themes: 1. the foundation of the beloved community; 2. the description of the beloved community; 3. the path to the beloved community. I want to rely mainly on King’s own writings; especially the recently published Volume VI of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Advocate of the Social Gospel. This volume reveals the extent to which the themes of the beloved community, as they filter through the social gospel, shape King’s thinking from early in his career. Thus it becomes possible to trace the arc of King’s developing vision of community rather than viewing his ideas as more episodic and disjunctive. The nascent unity within King’s understanding of community serves to reduce the separation that some have seen between the earlier and later King particularly after 1966. Mostly this separation relies on a distinction between King the persuader and King the activist with the latter more willing to use coercion. For example, David Lewis writes that King in 1966 “began to identify lucidly the forces that the impoverished Black American was up against. The period of rhetoric-- “jive” as the militants called it—was closing and a brief season of political realism had begun” (349). The implication is that the early King was unrealistic as to the political and social realities he faced. The new volume of the King Papers makes clear that this separation of the two King’s is less rigid. Certainly King’s thinking did develop. However, it is less a split than an evolution. In discussing the publication of King’s collection of sermons, Strength to Love, the volume’s introduction notes that “editors seemed particularly sensitive to King’s vivid anti-military and anti-war statements” (Papers Vol VI 41) To assuage their concerns, “The Harper & Row editors reduced the emphatic nature of King’s statements and softened his direct calls to act

or change” (Papers Vol VI 41). While King did accept the changes for marketing purposes, the original sermon drafts render a more militant and direct King, a King already concerned with where we are going and how to get there.

The Foundation of the Beloved Community

King’s notion of God and, by extension Jesus, grounds his vision of the beloved community. Both these shape his assessment of how our lives are to be lived and how we are to live together. For King, “God is the personal spirit, perfectly good, who in love creates, sustains, and orders all” (Papers Vol I 243). Since goodness and love are evaluative concepts, King sees God as “living and active” with a role to play in “the process of history” (Papers Vol I 294). Consequently King takes more of an interest in God as an ethical reality than as merely a theological or at least an abstract concept. Although nothing exists apart from God as the creator, King has little use for a purely metaphysical or speculative understanding of the relationship between God and creation. For King, the connection supports a much more practical and specific focus. He wants to understand the fundamental nature of creation in light of the moral qualities that God possess, qualities that underlie creation and which then also impart a moral imperative to our own lives. Simply put, God is not morally neutral. Creation, then, exists and moves in a direction that flows from and toward the goodness of God. Thus, for King, evil can never have the last word. It too is bound to what King calls “the permanent structure of God’s goodness” in which “God is working every moment in history for the triumph of goodness” (Papers Vol VI 228). To say that creation is good infers that human beings are to act on and out of this goodness. God’s goodness is not only the basis of creation; it also serves to establish the moral contours of human existence. Our actions must express God’s goodness as well. We can reject God’s

goodness and the moral order it sustains, but we cannot deny it. For King one of the foremost expressions of the moral order is justice.

If “God has made the universe to be based on a moral law” (Papers Vol II 252) then the primary question turns on the nature of the moral law. King answers that the law must evidence the essential moral qualities that define God. One of these qualities is justice, which then establishes the basis of how King views God’s moral law. If justice is the primary way to express God’s law then our actions must also conform to this law. We can see this attribution of justice in King’s effort to lay the moral foundation for the Montgomery Bus Boycott and to establish the need for resistance. Speaking to the mass meeting on the evening of December 5, 1955, the first day of the boycott, King tells his audience:

We are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie.

(Papers Vol III 73)

King returns to this theme again on December 20, 1956 to announce the end of the boycott. "But amid all of this we have to keep going with the faith that as we struggle, God struggles with us, and that the arc of the moral universe although long, is bending toward justice” (Papers Vol III 486). Justice, however, is not the only foundation of the beloved community. Love is the other characteristic that King associates with God, which is most fully revealed in Jesus.

As with his understanding of God, King’s focus on Jesus turns on the ethical qualities and teachings that Jesus embodies. Faith in Jesus is less a matter of belief that Jesus is the savior, son of God as a theological proposition than it is as an expression of seeing in Jesus the fullness of

what and who God wants us to be. In preparing for a Christmas season sermon in Dec 1952 entitled “After Christmas, What?” King’s outline notes that “We should go away with the conviction that Christ is the revelation of what man ought to be. Jesus revealed not only what God is but what man ought to be” (Papers Vol VI 129). Similarly in December 1958, King preaches the sermon “Christ Our Starting Point” in which he describes Jesus as the entrance to the Christian life. If we begin with God, King holds that we only begin with “our ideas about him.” Instead King argues that we must start with Jesus since “Christ tells us what God is like.” King also offers the striking comment that “God is Christlike” (Papers Vol VI 353) to signify the importance of Jesus.

As Jesus expresses God’s nature, he also reveals the moral direction of our own lives. For King, the two are directly connected. We know nothing of God’s nature unless we act to live that nature in light of Jesus’ life. All that Jesus does and says point to the underlying moral foundation of creation. Even the crucifixion for King acquires an ethical significance. “Christ’s death was not a ransom, or a penal substitute, or a penal example; rather it was a revelation of the sacrificial love of God intended to awaken an answering love in the hearts of men” (Papers Vol II 190). Jesus thus becomes for King the concrete manifestation of God’s ethical nature and the example for humanity to follow. We must, King argues, “live this thing” (Papers Vol VI 453) so that we too can become like Jesus, more like God, and so become more human. King places this ethical vision of sacrificial love as the challenge Jesus offers to a humanity broken by injustice and oppression. For King, Jesus “never ran away from anything,” (Papers Vol VI 893); he “didn’t stop” when faced with doubt and uncertainty; “he went on” even when alone (Papers Vol VI 277). Yet what is the specific challenge that Jesus represents? What is the example that King wants us to follow?

Of the many things that King says about Jesus, two factors stand out as essential for King's understanding the beloved community: self-love and love of others. Of the many difficulties facing the civil rights movement, King views the lack of self-respect and the corresponding sense of inferiority as one of the most detrimental. The loss of self-love, the absence of self-worth shadows King's efforts to end segregation. Like Gandhi, he realizes that the struggle against racism requires both an internal and external dimension. The first challenge that Jesus sets is the claim of the dignity of the individual. In his sermon, "Overcoming an Inferiority Complex," King centers on Jesus' affirmation of Zacchaeus' individual value to showcase the importance of self-worth. "Now it seems to me that that is the first way to overcome an inferiority complex—the principle of self-acceptance" (Papers Vol VI 307). King has Jesus tell Zacchaeus to recognize his worth and value. Self-love is the first step. It permits the individual to recognize and name injustice as a violation of that self-worth. With the recognition and acceptance of self-worth, King moves to Jesus' second challenge the love of others. Jesus as the example and Jesus as the story teller provide King with the evidence of what it means to live like Jesus. Relying on Jesus' own actions revealed through the Sermon on the Mount and particularly the parable of the Good Samaritan, King expresses what he sees as the central core of Jesus' teachings. We are to love one another and especially the enemy. From multiple sermons on loving one's enemies (see Papers Vol IV 315-324; Vol VI 126-128, 421-429), King stresses the essential nature of this love as critical for the future of humanity. King rejects the superficial assertion that the command is unrealistic and holds that "Instead of being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization" (Papers Vol VI 127). The contrast that King develops then is between the hate that denies community and the love that creates community. Again Jesus is the example.

“He did not seem to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with a radical love” (Papers Vol VI 489).

The radical love of Jesus and the creative power of God lead King to posit a third foundation of the beloved community, human unity. If we are to love and if we are created in God’s image then the combination of the two establishes the essential oneness of humanity that expresses the dignity of all. For King, the dignity of all and the worth that flows from it are essential givens of human existence. “This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal proportions by all men” (Testament 119). For King, love and creation ground human relationships and also provide the moral ought of our actions. What we do must maintain the basic unity of humanity. Not doing this, not acting to create and sustain community, denies human unity and the moral intentionality of God’s creation. Thus King calls segregation the sin of separation (Why 82). In his November 1956 sermon “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” King defines segregation as “a blatant denial of the unity we all have in Christ” (Papers Vol III 418). By placing the example of Jesus at the moral center, we can follow King’s attack on segregation. “If we are to remain true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we cannot rest until segregation and discrimination are banished from every area of American life” (Papers Vol VI 326). This condemnation of segregation as separation and disunity continues throughout his career. The “Letter From Birmingham Jail” shows King’s fundamental reliance on unity.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit by idly in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (Why 77)

If we start with Jesus, as King suggests, then injustice and violence move in the opposite direction away from the unity we have with God and, perhaps more importantly for King, away from the unity we have with each other.

The Description of the Beloved Community

King's description of the beloved community assumes two major forms: the visionary and the practical. The visionary dimension of the beloved community derives from King's eschatological proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Drawing on the familiar concept of a realized eschatology, King places the Kingdom of God in between the already and not yet. Thus the beloved community is both a present reality and a future hope. In the sermon "Death of Evil on the Seashore", King writes that "Even though the kingdom of God may remain 'not yet' as a universal reality in history, it may exist in the present isolated forms, such as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. 'The Kingdom of God' says the New Testament 'is in the midst of you'" (Papers Vol VI 512). The Dream Speech vividly reminds us of the expectation of the coming Kingdom. King's use of the refrain, "I have a dream that one day..." is more than a simple rhetorical device. It centers his understanding of the Kingdom as God's unfolding presence in human history. The visionary dream thus offers hope in what may seem to be a hopeless situation. It gives a reason for those in the struggle to continue the struggle. In addition to its sustaining ability, the Kingdom of God also stands in judgment against the continued injustices of racism and discrimination. The dream, then, stands in contrast to the present reality and shatters the complacency of American society. King thus uses the vision of the Kingdom of God to inspire resistance as well as to expose the sin of segregation. King's practical analysis of

the beloved community derives from his continued critique of American society combined with his notion of how the Kingdom of God finds itself already in our midst.

In his speech against the Vietnam War on April 4, 1967, King castigates the continued American presence in Vietnam. His charges against the war reflect a broad spectrum of opposition. The war drains needed resources from domestic programs; the war exposes the hypocrisy of American claims about freedom; the war perpetuates the view that violence can resolve conflicts; the war places America on the wrong side of the world revolution; the war destroys American and Vietnamese lives. The war is so wrong that King calls it a “demonic, destructive suction tube” (Testament 233). Some see King’s criticism of the war as constituting his shift from a passive, polite approach to a more aggressive, militant one. As I note above, this view of King distorts his social analysis and fails to comprehend the depth of his on-going critique of American society. It also limits our understanding of the role beloved community plays in King’s vision of society. King’s 1955 sermon “The Task of Christian Leadership Training for Education in the Local Community,” speaks of the imperative for religious leaders to save “men from moral bankruptcy” (Papers Vol VI 222). The moral bankruptcy King sees is more than a call for personal introspection; it also exhibits a profound level of social injustice and decay. In 1958, King laments that America is “losing her soul” (Papers Vol IV 490) by failing to confront the social evils that racism spawns. He makes the same claim years later in the Vietnam War speech. King’s prescription for America to reclaim her soul fixes the specific practical aspect of the beloved community—the social gospel.

Given King’s own references to the social gospel, it is not surprising that scholars widely recognize the movement’s importance for King (see Zepp 23-70). For example, King traces the numerous influences on his thinking in his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” (Testament 37-

38). Here he notes the role of Walter Raushenbusch and the social gospel movement. So why then mention it again? The answer lies in seeing how the new collection of King's sermons reveals his deeply held and long-running affiliation with the message of the social gospel. If moral decay represents the fundamental social problem then the solution stems from social redemption that King identifies with Jesus and the social gospel. King's sermon, "The One-Sided Approach to the Good Samaritan" from November 20, 1955 illustrates this connection. King often uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illuminate the significance of Jesus' teachings. In this sermon, King connects the Good Samaritan with "Christian social responsibility" in order to develop his interpretation of the parable. King stresses the need to follow the Samaritan's example. "Like the good Samaritan [sic] we must always stand ready to descend to the depth of human need." However, King moves beyond the individual act of compassion to argue that "there is another aspect of Christian social responsibility which is just as compelling. It seeks to tear down unjust conditions and build anew instead of patching things up." The one-sided Samaritan only looks "to sooth the effects of evil without going back to uproot the causes" (Papers Vol VI 240). True compassion cannot ignore the broader social context that surrounds the individual act of compassion. For King the expansion of compassion from the personal to the social also defines the mission of the church. Writing in 1962, his sermon "Can a Christian Be a Communist" bluntly states that "this is what we've got to see—that the church has a social gospel that it must be true to" (Papers Vol VI 541). While King's view of God, Jesus, and human unity provide the conceptual, visionary foundation for the beloved community, the social gospel shapes and directs its practical content. King views his ministry to create the beloved community through the lens of the social gospel.

The first entry in volume VI of the King Papers is an outline for a paper in a course on the Preaching Ministry of the Church that King took in the fall semester of 1948. The outline describes some of the history and function of preaching within the Christian tradition leading to King's own view of preaching. Perhaps reacting to his own experience, King writes that "it is my opinion that sincerity is not enough for the preaching ministry. The minister must be both sincere and intelligent. Too often our ministers possess the former but not the latter." King relates both qualities what he calls the "dual process" of preaching. "On the one hand I must attempt to change the soul of the individual so that their societies may be changed. On the other I must attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a chance to change. Therefore I must be concerned about unemployment, slumms[sic], and economic insecurity." At age nineteen, this view of preaching ministry leads King to conclude "I am a profound advocator of the social gospel" (Papers Vol VI 72). The following year King preaches on "Civilization's Great Need." He remarks that our scientific and material progress has outpaced our moral progress. "On the whole our material and intellectual advances have outrun our moral progress" (Papers Vol VI 86). While not necessarily denigrating the need for scientific development, King offers a corresponding moral development that he correlates to the social gospel. He concludes the sermon with a prayerful request to "Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color" (Papers Vol VI 88).

King continues to connect Jesus, the moral life, and the social gospel in two of his sermons from July 1954: "A Religion of Doing" and "What is Man." In the first sermon, King rejects the assertion that religion is only a matter of believing. Unless religion is an active, ethical force, King has little use for it. He appeals to his audience. "My friends may I say that a

Christianity that worships Christ emotionally and does not follow him ethically is a conventional sham.” King then adds what it means to follow Jesus ethically. “Christ is more concerned about our attitude towards racial prejudice and war than he is about our long processions. He is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors than how loud we sing his praises” (Papers Vol VI 173). Jesus shapes King’s social consciousness and forms this around the notion of the social gospel. King makes the connection even more explicit in the second sermon. He dismisses as superficial and wrong any faith that ignores the relationship between body and soul. King’s human being merges body and soul into a single whole. One cannot exist without the other. Arguing against the neglect of the body, King offers his response. “As I look at the economic and social injustices existing in our world, I plead for a church that shall be a fountainhead of a better social order. We can talk all we want to about saving souls from hell and preaching the pure and simple gospel, but unless we preach the social gospel, our evangelistic gospel will be meaningless” (Papers Vol VI 176). The focus on the social gospel establishes the platform from which King criticizes capitalism, colonialism, and militarism. The social gospel gives King the practical expression of social redemption, a way for America to save its soul. The next question is how to get there.

The Path to the Beloved Community

As I note in the beginning of this paper, King looks to nonviolence as the path to the beloved community. The means and ends must cohere. The beloved community requires a means consistent with its vision. King’s Dream is more than a rhetorical device; it also frames the ethical center of a redeemed community. To illumine the path, we can look at how King employs a theoretical and a practical basis for reaching the beloved community. The theoretical aspect of

the beloved community derives from our earlier discussion of God, Jesus, and human unity. These three factors guide King's analysis of the beloved community. The community cannot be attained unless all three are present as the ethical substratum of our actions. First, our actions must conform to God's creative purpose of relating to one another in the image of God. Second, what we do must follow the example of Jesus. Third, our deeds must allow for the creation of unity against what King views as the sin of division and discord. These three components surround King's vision of the beloved community. They structure the way we are to think about and imagine what our lives together might entail for without them community remains a false hope. We can see the loss of community in King's July 1953 sermon "False Gods We Worship." Here King examines the misplaced nature of our faith as we turn to science, nationalism and money as the source of community and meaning (Papers Vol VI 130-136). As false gods, these lead to disillusionment. By contrast the sermon "Creating the Abundant Life," proposes a life where we discover meaning through seeing a purpose beyond the self, by living to our highest ideals, and by "affirming an abiding religious faith" (Papers Vol VI 189-191). The beloved community seeks to express these elements, but it does not arrive on its own. There are practical steps upon which the beloved community depends.

If the dream is more than rhetoric; if the beloved community is more than a utopian vision then King needs to offer a plan that will achieve that end. Even though King is killed early in his career and perhaps did not have time to develop a systematic, organized plan, he does show a way toward the beloved community. While nonviolence is clearly the way, it is nonviolence within a broader composition of concepts. First, arising from his criticism of Christianity, King argues that we must "be more concerned about social justice," that we need to exhibit a "passionate concern for social justice" if Christianity is to have any relevance (Papers

Vol VI 148). Second, the passion for social justice must lead to action for social justice. King rejects a faith that does not act. His sermon “A Religion of Doing” from July 1954 constantly makes this point. King’s image of Jesus demands an active faith. “Religion to be real and genuine must not only be something that men talk about, but it must be something that men live about. Jesus recognized that there is always the danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. He was quite certain that the tree of religion becomes dry and even dead when it fails to produce the fruit of action” (Papers Vol VI 171). We can see how King puts this belief into practice during the formation of the Social and Political Action Committee at the Dexter Avenue Church “to keep the congregation intelligently informed on the social, political, and economic situations” (Stride 30). At the end of Stride Toward Freedom, King outlines a four-point constructive program for the African-American community: economic self-improvement, voter registration, personal responsibility, and overcoming apathy (Stride 222-223). Even in this nascent form, King looks toward an active, participatory path to the beloved community.

The third element of King’s path to the beloved community balances with the passion for social justice and the need for action. These two elements may be interpreted more as being external or outwardly focused. King turns the third component inward. The beloved community also requires a moral self-examination to become the kind of person capable of creating the beloved community in the first place. The moral progress King associates with the demand for social change also reflects onto the individual. Extending beyond King’s analysis of social conditions, moral bankruptcy is also a matter for the individual. Thus King establishes a connection between the social and the individual. Returning to King’s 1949 sermon “Civilization’s Greatest Need,” we see this relationship. He writes that “Unless we can

reestablish the moral and spiritual ends of living in personal character and social justice, our civilization will ruin itself with the misuse of its own instruments” (Papers Vol VI 87). The beloved community requires that each, the personal and the social, be present. More pointedly, King is not only asking how a society becomes just, he is also asking how a person becomes nonviolent. Again Jesus plays a role as King prescribes the features of nonviolence such as love, courage, compassion, humility, and patience from his understanding of Jesus. A moral character that these qualities shape can meet oppression and injustice without collapsing into bitterness and hate. Thus for King the beloved community has a dual focus, that of doing and being. Personal and social transformation converge together to form the beloved community.

In examining the three levels of the beloved community, its foundations, its description, and its creation, we can see how King utilizes religious, political, and personal elements to develop his perception of the beloved community. These combine to offer an expansive vision that allows King to see the beloved community as future hope as well as a present reality. The beloved community is a way by which we can judge our moral progress both as a society and as individuals. It is finally what King wanted us to understand, that we are “tied in a single garment of destiny” (Papers Vol VI 485).

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