



Thinking about the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I have been struck by how Dr. King embraced a middle position between the opposing forces of white supremacy and those who would use violence against injustice and hate. For King, the middle was not concession or moderation but conviction: a place of courage and determination to love as Jesus loved.

With eloquent and unflinching honesty, he boldly named and confronted the inhumanity of racism and other kinds of oppression. With equal passion, he insisted that the means of overcoming evil must match the end or goal. The goal of King's work was the beloved community: a community in which all humans are cared for, and no one experiences poverty, hunger, violence, or hate. Inspired by his faith, King aimed for nothing less than human reconciliation and redemption, a vision of the interrelatedness and solidarity of the human family bound together in agape (love).

The means of overcoming evil must match the end, which is love. From this conviction, King consistently practiced nonviolent direct action in pursuit of justice: a courageous, fierce, disciplined, and dangerous assault on the heart of racism. He advocated for aggressive programs to overturn poverty and for more accurate and inclusive teaching of history so that Black people would grow up with an "unassailable and majestic sense" of their own value.

Love for King was not mild or nice but a potent force against hate and injustice. He wrote:

One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. . . . What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

In other words, King leaned in to the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. He believed that God's beloved community was both a transforming reality now, albeit never complete, and a hope that was "not yet." Between "superficial optimism" and "crippling pessimism," King saw God at work in the world. As he put it, God is "striving in our striving. . . . So as we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, we do not struggle alone; we have cosmic companionship. The God of the universe struggles with us. In the final analysis, evil dies on the seashore not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it."

I find this vision of action and trust deeply compelling: a call to love boldly against injustice and harm because we are part of a beloved community being formed by God, who is in the process of triumphing over evil. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have turned ninety-three this year. He was two years younger than his friend, the renowned actor Sydney Poitier, who died eight days ago. As we celebrate Dr. King's birthday this year and reflect on his courage, may his legacy inspire us always to join the potent force of love, for there is much to do.

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

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Quotations:

*Where Do We Go from Here* (Beacon, 1967; repr. 2010; pgs. 14, 37-38, 42)

"The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore" (Sermon in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*; vol. 6, pg. 512)