



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

We Have to Step Back to Move Forward
Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration, Luke 6:27-36
January 19, 2025
The Rev. Paul McLain

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

I am now convinced that Dante missed one of the rings of hell that he so graphically described in the classic, *The Inferno*. It is the Kroger parking lot on Union. Like many of you, I tried to run countless errands the day before the snowstorm hit just over a week ago. One was a stop at Kroger, completely full of harried shoppers with a parking lot tightly packed with cars and trucks.

After shopping, I pulled out of my parking space only to get caught up in a traffic logjam that lasted at least five minutes. The drivers had scowls on their faces and seemed to regard the other drivers as enemy combatants. Each driver did what they thought would be helpful to his or her own cause by lunging forward each time there was the slightest opening. But that just made it worse. What we needed was for the drivers on the perimeter of the logjam to move back a few feet to enable other cars to back up and give us all space to move. We were totally dependent on fellow drivers to do something counterintuitive, to move backward instead of forward, in order for all of us to get out of our collective mess. As ironic as it seems, sometimes in order for all of us to move forward, we have to step back.

In today's Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Plain. It is not as famous as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. But it is aptly named both for its site on a level field and for Jesus's prophetic preaching as the Great Leveler. Much like the experience in the Kroger parking lot, he exposes our interdependence. Jesus levels out the divide between friends and enemies. In fact, he preaches that we are not only to forgive our enemies, but to treat them as friends – friends whom we are to bless, pray for, and love.

Jesus spent the rest of his earthly ministry practicing what he preached even with those who tortured and crucified him. He saw nonviolence not as a passive response, but as a way of directly confronting evil in such a manner that he, and we, do not succumb to it. Instead, he, and we, show it for what it is to the world

and to the perpetrators themselves. Jesus sought and still seeks to replace the way of violence with The Way of Love.

At age 15, a young Martin Luther King, Jr., known at the time as M.L., went by bus to a statewide public speaking contest in Dublin, Georgia. His oration there was a blueprint for what would later become the 'I Have a Dream' speech. On the long ride home from Dublin, the bus was empty enough at first that Black passengers could sit where they liked. But when the bus stopped in Macon, the white bus driver ordered M.L. and his classmate to give up their seats to the oncoming white passengers. 'We didn't move quickly enough to suit him,' M.L. recalled. The bus driver began cursing and called them racial slurs. For the next eighty miles, M.L. stood. 'That night will never leave my memory,' he said. 'It was the angriest I have ever been in my life.' The optimism of his speech had been crushed. 'Suddenly,' M.L. said, 'I realized I don't count. I'm nobody.'

Yet, his anger did not turn into violence. History would be very different if it had. M.L. studied the life and writings of Mahatma Gandhi, the spiritual leader of India who liberated the people there through a direct campaign of nonviolence. Why did Gandhi take this approach? Gandhi was steeped in the Hindu philosophy of Advaita, a Sanskrit word that means 'not-two.' It signifies that all beings and reality are one, and that all life is interconnected. Gandhi came to believe that the universe is held together by nonviolence, and that the goal of all religions is to achieve oneness with all life.

In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail in 1963, Dr. King wrote of this interconnectedness of humanity: 'Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by 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.'

When Dr. King returned to Birmingham to speak that fall, his blend of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and interconnectedness with Jesus's preaching of loving enemies was put to the test. Incensed at Dr. King's views and presence, a white supremacist rushed on stage and landed two punches to Dr. King's face. Instead of fighting back, one attendee remembered that Dr. King 'dropped his hands like a newborn baby.' As others ran to Dr. King's aid and pulled the man away, Dr. King

yelled, 'Don't touch him. Don't touch him. We have to pray for him.' The man turned out to be a member of the American Nazi Party. Dr. King refused to press charges and even offered to let the man return to his seat to hear the rest of the speech.

Back to that day at the Kroger parking lot. After a few minutes of cars lunging forward, an older Black man who served as security guard, came out into the middle of our logjam. He calmly raised his hand to direct cars to move back a few feet so that all of us could get to where we were going. As he saw drivers relax their scowls and move from selfish lunging forward to backing away to make room for others, I noticed a smile begin to spread on the old man's face. He taught us the power of gentle persuasion. In a little way, he taught us the lesson Gandhi, Dr. King, and Jesus all preached and lived.

There is still much injustice in our world. We are still called to confront evil directly through resistance and action. But it must be done in nonviolent and even loving ways. It is only accomplished by taking a deep breath, a rechanneling of anger, and a step back from violent actions, words, or thoughts.

Only then, will we ever be able to move forward together as one people,
embracing a shared humanity,
united as beloved children of God.

Amen.