

4G Faith, 5G God
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Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: John 14:1-13

On Palm Sunday, 1959, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s congregation at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was especially eager to hear him preach. Not only was this Sunday one of the highest holidays of the Christian year, but King had been absent from the pulpit for the last five weeks as he toured the Middle East, India, and Sri Lanka.

Just one week earlier, King had literally stood atop the Mt. of Olives, surveying Jerusalem's Old City down below and retracing Jesus' journey into the city and up to the Temple where he overturned the tables of the money-changers that historic day.

Given King's oratorical acuity, and now his first-hand experience of the very places Jesus where had ridden and walked on Palm Sunday, one could logically expect that this would be a Palm Sunday sermon for the history books.

It was. But not for the reasons his congregation would have expected.

A scan of the worship bulletin that morning would have revealed that Dr. King had other plans that morning. His two chosen texts were not the traditional Palm Sunday texts at all. His selections were these:

John 10:16: "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold."

John 14:12: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also. And greater works than these shall he do because I go unto my Father."

King began his sermon acknowledging the awkwardness of passing over the Palm Sunday story. He even confessed that "*if I talked about that this morning, I could talk about it not only from what the Bible says but from personal experience, first-hand experience.*"

Then he continued,

But I beg of you to indulge me this morning to talk about the life of a man who lived in India. I think I'm justified in doing this because I believe this man, more than anybody else in the modern world, caught the spirit of Jesus Christ and lived it more completely in his life. His name was Gandhi, Mohadas K. Gandhi. And after he lived a few years, the poet Tagore, who lived in India, gave him another name: 'Mahatma,' the great soul And we know him as Mahatma Gandhi.

As it happened, King's trip abroad included not only time in India, but a significant visit to Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad.

Years earlier, King had been inspired by Gandhi's success with nonviolent resistance in the liberation of India from British rule, and began using nonviolent resistance as a strategy in his earlier civil rights work, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.

However, King's 1959 trip to India deepened his understanding of Gandhi's philosophy, which is known as *Satyagraha*. While Gandhi was no longer alive when King visited the ashram, he met with a number of Gandhi's close associates, including Vinoba Bhave, a social reformer and the person commonly viewed as Gandhi's spiritual successor.

King's experience at the ashram struck him so deeply, and galvanized him to speak about Gandhi so urgently, that he chose not to wait until Holy Week was over to tell his flock what was moving his heart most dramatically.

Having spent a week at Gandhi's ashram myself last January, attending a "Gandhi 3.0 Retreat" at the invitation of ServiceSpace – a nonprofit that often collaborates with the ashram – I can tell you it's a life-changing experience to spend time with its people; to see them in action to better the lives of India's poorest and most oppressed people.

Most significantly to me, and I'm guessing it may have been for King, was the experience of Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy carried out not merely as a political strategy, but as an entire, comprehensive *way of life*.

Gandhi's people don't practice nonviolence, and engage in nonviolent resistance, merely because they consider it the surest path to success. Non-violence is a way of life that you practice day in, day out, regardless of what it achieves in the outer world – because it is the surest path to peace and joy in one's inner world. And sooner or later, the inner always changes the outer.

If King's experience of Gandhi's ashram was anything like mine, what he experienced was an unassuming group of Hindus humbly serving their community and nation without regard to race, religion, or class; a group of committed people who have dedicated their lives, their loves, and their hope to making the world a better place, starting from the places where life is the worst. He found a group of Hindus living out Jesus' own commandment to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, pray for those who persecute us – and doing so by refusing to consider anyone truly an enemy.

Said King, after witnessing the work of the ashram first-hand:

The aftermath of violence is always bitterness; the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community so that when the battle is over, it's over, and a new love and a new understanding and a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.

King went on to explain his choice of the “sheep not of this fold” and “greater things than these” passages as his sermon focus:

I believe these two passages of scripture apply more uniquely to the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi than to any other individual in the history of the world. For here was a man who was not a Christian in terms of being a member of the Christian church but who was a Christian. And it is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church. And the second thing is, that this man took the message of Jesus Christ and was able to do even greater works than Jesus did in his lifetime. Jesus himself predicted this: “Ye shall do even greater works.”

Regarding those “greater works,” King recapped a story he was told while dining with India’s Prime Minister, Nehru:

Somebody said that when Mahatma Gandhi was coming over to England for the roundtable conference in 1932, a group of people stood there waiting. And ... while they were waiting somebody said, ‘You see around that cliff? That was where Julius Caesar came, the way he came in when he invaded Britain years ago.’ And then somebody pointed over to another place and said, ‘That was the way William the Conqueror came in. They invaded years ago in the Battle of Hastings.’ Then somebody else looked over and said, ‘There is another conqueror coming in. In just a few minutes the third and greatest conqueror that has ever come into Great Britain.’ And strangely enough, this little man came in with no armies, no guards around him, no military might, no beautiful clothes, just loin cloth, but this man proved to be the greatest conqueror that the British Empire ever faced. He was able to achieve, through love and nonviolence, the independence of his people and break the backbone of the British Empire. ‘Ye shall do greater works than I have done.’ And this is exemplified in the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

When I read MLK’s account of Gandhi and visiting his ashram in King’s Palm Sunday sermon, and set it alongside his “I have a dream” speech preached two years later, King’s dream for America seems clearly to have been inspired by the reality he saw being lived out at the ashram.

This lived reality drove King not only to throw out his Palm Sunday sermon and preach on Gandhi, but inspired King to dream and work toward a day when:

“on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood,” when

“little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers,” when

“every valley shall be exalted. The mountains and the hills shall be made low. The rough places shall be made plains and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”

I'm not going to recap everything King said about Gandhi and his significance on that surprising Palm Sunday morning. After all, King spoke about Gandhi for about an hour.

I do want to make an observation, however, about what impresses me so much about his sermon and its particular relevance for our day.

A great many Christians around the world believe that faith specifically in Jesus as Lord and Savior is *the only* way to God, outside of which there is no possibility of either connection with the Divine or salvation itself. In fact, many of the world's Christian leaders would preach – and have preached – that a man like Gandhi, though good and righteous, is burning in hell.

Most Christians who believe in this form of Christian exclusivism base their belief primarily on their interpretation of a single line from John's Gospel, where Jesus states, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) They assume that there is no other possible way to interpret this passage other than that Jesus is saying, "It's my way or the hell way."

Yet, as MLK knew well, Jesus was not talking about a religion, or even himself, as being the only connection between God and humanity. He was talking about a *way of life* that connects us to the divine.

If you wonder what way of life Jesus is referring to, happily he tells us. I call it the "4G" Way of Life:

When asked point-blank what is the greatest commandment of all, Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In other words, Jesus identified the three "Great Loves" as being most important of all: Love of God, Love of Neighbor, and Love of Self. This last one often drops off our radar, but if you are to love your neighbor *as yourself*, then love of self is as crucial as love of neighbor.

Jesus meant these three Great Loves to be practiced together at all times, as a coherent whole. Meaning, you are never going to connect with the Divine if you conclude that "two outta three ain't bad" and only practice loving God and Self, but not your neighbor; or God and Neighbor, but not yourself; or Neighbor and Self, but not God. All three Great Loves must be held – and practiced – together if we are to have any hope of our actions fulfilling the Divine will for ourselves and others.

Thus, according to Jesus, there can be no social justice, or work for racial equality that is connected to the Divine will for humanity unless it includes the 3Gs – the 3 **G**reat Loves of God, Neighbor, and Self.

This does not mean that atheists or agnostics are excluded – and definitely does not mean that people of other beliefs in God are excluded. As Jesus so explicitly taught – and demonstrated through his life, death, and resurrection – there is another “G” that is critical to the Way of Life he practiced: “**G**race.” If you cannot give or receive Grace, good luck connecting to God.

Grace is so critical because none of us – including those of us who believe strongly in God’s existence, and fervently love God – ever practices the three Great Loves *together* for very long. We rely on God’s perfection to cover our own imperfections; God’s imagination to cover for our lack of imagination; God’s generosity to cover for our stinginess; and God’s belief in us to cover for our consistent failure to believe in the presence and power very God some of us so readily proclaim.

Rev. Dr. King interpreted John 14:6 in light of John 10:16, where Jesus plainly states that he has other sheep that do not belong to the Christian fold. These are “sheep” who may not follow Jesus as their Lord, yet practice a “4G” way of life.

In Gandhi, King saw a devout soul who practiced an incredibly Jesus-like way of life, and taught others to be highly disciplined in loving God, Neighbor, and Self as well, yet in a context of offering extraordinary Grace to those who practiced these very things badly. Thus, King knew Gandhi to be part of Jesus’ own flock, even if not of the Christian fold.

Instead of writing Gandhi off, therefore, as someone who had nothing to teach a Christian leader like himself, King studied Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy with great enthusiasm, seeing it as helpful for learning how Christ’s own nonviolent path may be practiced in our day. The rest, as they say, is history.

If you hold the belief that faith in Jesus is the only way to salvation, I am not suggesting that this belief makes you a racist, or unjust, or means you are against the path of nonviolence. Yet I am advising that you should consider carefully your interpretation of Jesus’ words.

Bear in mind that belief that a loving God will eternally torture that portion of God’s children who are adherents of other religions has been fueling violence, racism, inequality and colonialism around the globe *for centuries*.

Such a belief not only fails to reflect Jesus’ own belief and that of the early Church, but it denigrates people of other beliefs who follow a righteous path, like Gandhi. It also keeps us from learning from people of other faiths, like King so obviously did.

If you think that Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Jews have nothing valuable to teach Christians about living a nonviolent Way of Life in the face of injustice and oppression – or even about following Jesus – then you have likely never sat with these folks and listened. Further, you are cutting yourself off from ready allies in the pursuit of the very things you hold dear.

What we need today in our work for social justice and racial equality is not more Christian exclusivism, or even more Christian “progressives” – of which I have considered myself one for the last 30 years of my ministry. Christian “progressives” are a small and shrinking band, many

of whom have lost sight of Jesus' commandment to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who persecute us.

What is needed is more "Christian Pluralists." That is, Christians of any theological or political stripe who claim fully and unapologetically the path of Jesus *without denying the legitimacy for other paths that God may create for humanity*. Christians who know their Christ has other sheep that are not of the Christian fold, with whom we may not only join hands and walk the path of peace and justice, but learn from just as King did.

Christian Pluralists practice a 4G faith in a 5G God. The fifth "G" stands for Great Awakening. Meaning, when we connect with God through practicing a 4G way of life, God is always going to expand our awareness; show us some new angle on life and love that we have never considered, or never embraced. A 5G God is always going to enlarge the circle of our awareness of who is in and who is out and teach us what it really means to become a New Creation.

It's time to topple the tables in our own Temple of Christian Exclusivism, and join hands with people of all faiths praying, as King did at the conclusion of his Palm Sunday sermon,

*O God, our gracious Heavenly [Parent], we thank Thee for the fact that you have inspired men and women in all nations and in all cultures. **We call you different names: some call Thee Allah; some call you Elohim; some call you Jehovah; some call you Brahma; and some call you the unmoved Mover; some call you the Archetectonic Good. But we know that these are all names for one and the same God, and we know you are one.** And grant, O God, that we will follow Thee and become so committed to Thy way and Thy kingdom that we will be able to establish in our lives and in this world a [familial community]. We will be able to establish here a kingdom of understanding, where [all people] will live together as [siblings] and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. In the name **and spirit** of Jesus we pray. Amen*