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Jesus, Gandhi, King & You

Epiphany 2, a, Jan. 20, 2008

Is. 49:1-7

G. Williams Jones tells a captivating modern parable about a tattered prospector entered the Great Glass City one day. Riding his mule down streets between dazzling glass buildings, he shouted, "I've found it—the stone of great price!"ⁱ

A few curious passers-by stopped and crowded around him.

"Look!" he shouted ecstatically, holding a large uncut diamond before their gaze. "It's a diamond!"

"Looks just like glass to me," said one lay expert, "and downright inferior glass, at that. All melted looking. Must have been fused by the Blast. Curious."

With this assessment the crowd began to disperse.

No! No! Look again!" cried the prospector. "It's valuable, exceedingly valuable!"

"If you want to see something exceedingly valuable, take a gander at *this!*" said a millionaire in the crowd, extending a knuckle circled by a large, ruby-colored, cut glass ring.

After the "oooh's" and "aaah's" of the crowd died down, the prospector protested, "No! My diamond is far more valuable than your glass, no matter how beautiful your glass, nor how ugly my stone. Here, let me show you," he said, taking the millionaire's ring firmly in his grasp. With his diamond

the prospector scratched a very small "x" on the surface of the ruby-colored glass.

"There! see?" he said, stepping back from his work. "Do you see *now* how the diamond is greater than the glass? Diamond scratches glass, but glass can't scratch diamond!"

"Ye gods, you stupid idiot!" screamed the millionaire, looking closely at his ring. "You've ruined a ten-thousand-dollar work of the glassmaker's art!"

The prospector was thrown in prison for three years.

At the end of the third year, when he was released from prison, the prospector marched straightway to enact a plan he had been formulating all these years in his dungeon. Boldly he approached the Wondrous Shrine of Multicolored Glass at the center of the Great Glass City. (The residents had a habit of gathering there on their day off to watch the amazing display of colored lights on the colored glass, and then going home with a good feeling.) The prospector stepped resolutely up to the mammoth center panel of the glass shrine and with his diamond inscribed an eight-foot circle in its surface. Then he tapped the circle lightly with his forefinger. The sound of shattering glass brought a mob on the run. Pleased at the response, the prospector held the diamond aloft and was about to begin speaking to the people when they all cried out, as if with one voice, "Just *look* what you've done to our shrine!"

With this they began pelting him with glass cobblestones, old bottles, and shards from the shattered shrine until he was quite covered by them, and quite dead. Only the diamond, still clutched in the prospector's dead fist, projected above the pile of vitreous debris.

In the days that followed the incident, some heathens, heretics, atheists, doubters, and malcontents in that great city began to form a society devoted

to the carrying on of the prospector's message about diamond being more valuable than glass. They also devoted themselves to the living-out of the implications of such a revolutionary thesis. And so they too were persecuted, and many were killed. (It may be of passing interest to some readers to note that, rather than being called "diamond-lovers," they were called "glass-haters.")

But posterity has been more kind to the prospector and his memory. Around that original pile of glass, still topped with the bone-held diamond, is today a large and most impressive shrine of the finest multicolored glass that money can buy. The residents of the Great Glass City have a habit of gathering there on their day off to watch the spectacular displays of colored lights on the colored glass, and then going home with a good feeling.¹

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We have a tendency to take the clear message of the prophet, and instead of allowing it to transform us like it is intended to do,..... we transform the prophet and prophet's message into something more palatable to our conventional ways of thinking. Only rarely do we "get it." Most often we ignore the prophets. At our worst, we stone them.

And this is, sadly, true throughout history. Take a look at what happens to the prophets in the Old Testament who were bold enough to proclaim what God gives them to share with the people. It is not pretty. Most generally we do not wish to be disturbed from the path we have chosen for ourselves, even when the disturbance comes from Almighty God.

Jesus' life is a prime, no, **the Prime**, example of this very truth. The crucifixion of Jesus is the paradigm of the world's reaction to God's gift. We kill it. We kill it.

This weekend and tomorrow we celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but as a nation we are in the midst of doing the very same transformation with this prophet that we have done with Jesus and all the others. Vincent Harding, author of *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, writes " people tend to want a manageable hero, one who can fit into our own relatively narrow confines of what is important....and King, it seems to me, was constantly breaking out of those confines. "

Julian Bond, friend and co-worker of King, decried how America honors "an antiseptic hero. We have stripped his life of controversy, and celebrate the conventional instead. "

Much of our nation has no interest in delving into the spiritual and theological depths of the man. They might lead you to believe that King is a great hero of the 20th century's civil-rights movement because of **his compassion** for the poor whites and blacks of our nation and the **positive change** that his leadership produced.

But that is not nearly deep enough. I have sometimes wondered how our nation would lift up King if he had chosen a different method of change. What if Martin Luther King Jr. had chosen the path of Malcolm X which is the path of essentially every leader the world as ever known? What if Martin had chosen the path of **violence resistance** in response to **violence repression**. What if the civil-rights movement had turned into a racial war complete with blood shed, bludgeoning, terrorism, and the kind of hostility that:

- American colonists visited upon the British Empire's overlords, or
- the Israelis and Palestinians are experiencing today as the two peoples coexist uneasily on one small plot of land.

No, I say, if Martin Luther King Jr. had led a violent revolution to redress the wrongs his people were suffering, there would be little to celebrate today and tomorrow. Our nation might have moved towards racial justice, but if the tool for the movement was violence, the result could not be so heartily celebrated. Thank God that Martin Luther King Jr. was deeply Christian... and had discerned the Christian call to non-violence that is as plain as day in the Scriptures... That is the real message, the real gift he still offers for our transformation.

King had been deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi with regard to this key gift to our age.... A faithful non-violent resistance to evil... a willingness to suffer... tremendously... unjustly... without resorting to violent means of their oppressors. It is a valuable, an exceedingly valuable gift whether the world recognizes it or not.

King shared Mahatma Gandhi's view that nonviolence must express **love** for those against whom one is struggling. King first employed nonviolence as a method in the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans. But he came to appreciate nonviolence on an international scale as well.

“[T]here are three different views on the subject of violence,” he wrote.

>the first “is the approach of pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage.” This is the way that Jesus illustrated, that Gandhi demonstrated, the way that King advocated, the way that seems utterly utopian to realpolitik world that has always been in charge.

>”The second,” continued King, ” is violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as legal and moral. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi, who sanctioned it for those unable to master pure nonviolence.”

>”The third is advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously.” King concluded, ominously: “There are incalculable perils in this approach.”ⁱⁱ

By refusing to follow the conventional method of revolution, by taking the first, the high road that Jesus taught him, Martin Luther King and the great cadre of faithful who worked with him, have moved us forward... with a new appreciation for how oppression can be overthrown in Gospel fashion... just as Jesus taught.²

King’s vision for the call grew as he led the movement. He weighed in:

- on the war in Viet Nam,
- the economic inequalities in hiring, in housing, in schooling that perpetuated injustice.
- He was among the first to call for reparations – financial reparations- for lifetimes of slavery.

² See the works of Walter Wink that specify how Jesus’ non-violent resistance of evil is meant to be lived by Christians.

Those weren't popular stands then and many today still resist the prophet's message. But let us at least be clear and honest about what that message is, even if we can't live up to its callyet.

King reached a level of vision and understanding that most never will. And from the mountaintop he called... he still calls... down to us:

“Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason 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 way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My friends, it is time for you and me to take up the mantle of discipleship that Dr. King modeled for us. It is time for us to name how living committed to non-violence in every way possible will make our lives look different from our neighbors.

It is time for us to stand up for justice for all people... with no exceptions... for God loves us **all** equally... with no exceptions.

It is time for us to make our lives count... to spend ourselves extravagantly...in the building of a new society through a new kind of commitment to the common good; to an engaged and generous citizenship,

and, yes, to the reform of government.... Making it ever more By the people, and For the people.. but not just for SOME of the people.... As that has worked for over two hundred years....a government for ALL the people of this nation... in solidarity with all God's children worldwide... and all God's earth...this generation and those to come. It is a huge change in vision!

It is time for us to move out in faith....turning the other cheek... as we resist evil using the diamond tipped method of non-violence... that Jesus illustrated, that Gandhi demonstrated that Martin Luther King Jr. advocated. Diamond scratches glass, glass doesn't scratch diamond. And only Love can overcome violence. Violence cannot overcome love.

It is an enormous challenge, but let us welcome, let us embrace the message of the prophets.

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth...."

"Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

And that "you" means You!

Jesus, Gandhi, King, and YOU!

Halleluiah and Amen.

ⁱ This story, *The Diamond*, is from G. William Jones' book, *The Innovator and Other Modern Parables*, 1969, Abingdon Press, Nashville.

ⁱⁱ Found in *But What Did He Say About Peace? What Will We Say?* by David Herndon a sermon delivered January, 19 2003 at First Unitarian Church Pittsburgh, PA

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution*