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## *Just Love*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Epiphany 2 – Year C**

*“Your love, O lord, reaches to the heavens, and your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the strong mountains, your justice like the great deep.”*

In spite of the words of our psalm today, there has been a tendency throughout Christian history to separate God’s love from God’s judgment and, following that, to separate those whom God loves—naturally “us”—from those whom God judges, naturally “them.”

This is what the Gnostic Marcion tried to do in the second century. He was so baffled by the coherence of God’s mercy and righteousness that he decided they must be the unique characteristics of two different gods: the universal, merciful God of the New Testament, who created the superior spiritual realm; and the tribal, jealous Old Testament God who created the inferior material order. Not only did this split the Bible, as well as the God it points to, but it also sought to sever Christians from their Jewish roots.

Christian tradition flatly rejects such divisions. Our psalm, for example, reminds us that God’s love and God’s righteousness go hand in hand, and that as God’s love reaches to the heavens, and God’s justice to the great deep, no one and no thing can escape God’s reach, or nullify God’s just love.

We all know this, of course. That is, until it comes to our own conflicts. Until it comes to our own enemies. Until we feel threatened, attacked, or scared. Then, we want justice. Now. For us. At all costs. Then we start to see God as our God, not theirs; then, never doubting that God loves us, we may conveniently forget that God loves “them,” too.

This weekend, we remember and thank Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who refused to surrender the conviction that God’s love embraces all people, and that this love requires for justice for all people, too. His conviction was so constant that he believed even the pursuit of justice—even the righting of wrong—must be done with love—love for both the victim and the perpetrator, both the oppressed and the oppressor.

But “love” is such a big word that means so many different things in different contexts, and it’s often reduced to little more than a mushy sentiment—or, in our most difficult conflicts, to little more than a noble but impractical, impossible ideal. So what does it look like to love in the pursuit of justice? What does love look like in the crucible of conflict?

For King, it was this: he refused to hate. Anyone. Which meant he refused to hate those who hated him, or threatened him, or committed violence against him and his people. King didn’t come up with this idea himself, of course. He was following Jesus, who also refused to hate. One of King’s mentors, Howard Thurman, says: “[Jesus] saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father. He affirmed life; and hatred was the great denial.”<sup>[1]</sup> Hatred allows the hater to do to other human beings what he could not ordinarily do, without losing his self-respect or violating his conscience. And so, ultimately, Thurman concludes, hatred “destroys the core of the life of the hater.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Now, since King wasn’t Jesus, he had to work at this. He and his colleagues prayed, and studied, and trained to keep their righteous anger from devolving into hatred—to hold onto their integrity, and their humanity, no matter what.

This was not weakness. This was not acquiescence to the evil of racism or to the powers that be. This was the ultimate

resistance: they would not be governed by hatred and fear. They would not play by the rules of an unjust society. They would not give their opponents that kind of power over them.

Jesus gave them another option. “Love,” King claimed, “is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity.”<sup>[3]</sup>

That all sounds good and true, doesn’t it, in theory at least? It sounds good when someone else does it. But it doesn’t sound quite so appealing when it comes to the real-life enemies we face today: the person who betrayed you, or bullied you, or humiliated you; or the stranger who broke into your car, or flicked you off in traffic. It doesn’t sound so lovely when it comes to the other political party, the other religion, the other country in any conflict. And it really doesn’t sound appealing, it may seem downright impossible, when the enemy is a terrorist group like ISIS.

Now let me be clear. I’m not saying that we need to love ISIS as an organization, or make excuses for terrorists, or close our eyes to the suffering they are causing around the world. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t be angry. But anger is not hate.

And, if we believe King, and the Christ he followed, and if we believe that God’s just love reaches from the heavens to the depths, we have to trust that no one is beyond God’s love, justice, and redemption. We have to remember that God loves the human beings who commit violence as much as God loves their victims—that God loves “them,” whoever that is, as much as God loves “us.” And that God grieves for all of us, and for our broken world.

And we need to reflect this in our rhetoric. Maybe even in our prayers.

I know it’s hard. Believe me. I’m as angry and scared and confused as anyone else. But King shows us it is possible to confront evil and sin—it is possible to pursue justice, while remembering the humanity of those on the other side. It’s possible, with God’s help, but it’s not easy.

No, it’s not easy, because it forces us to wrestle with ambiguity. It makes us aware of the tragic element of every act of violence, no matter how legitimate or reasonable that action may seem to be; no matter who is committing it, or whom it’s against. It exposes convenient dualities that absolve us from any moral responsibility for our own thoughts and actions. It complicates our response to others’ hatred and violence. And in that, it just might protect our humanity, too.

I fully expect some resistance to what I’m saying. To be honest, I resist it on some level myself. I’m still growing into loving my enemies, too. But I do believe this is Christ’s, and King’s, call to us: in our fear and anger, in our pursuit of justice, and in our confrontation of evil, let us not succumb to hate. Let us not become haters.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Beacon Press, 1996; first published 1949 by Abingdon Press), p. 88.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>[3]</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, on December 25, 1957.

As King says: “Jesus is eternally right. History is replete with the bleached bones of nations that refused to listen to him. May we . . . hear and follow his words — before it is too late. May we solemnly realize that we shall never be true sons of our heavenly Father until we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.”