

Text: [Romans 12:9-21 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: January 18, 2026 – MLK Weekend
Title: “Peace: Not Merely the Absence of Tension” – What Dr. King Still Asks of Us, Wk 2
Theme: Peace is a deliberate choice we have to make again and again.

Introduction

Last week, anticipating Dr. King’s birthday this weekend, we began a series where we are bringing some of Dr. King’s writings into conversation not only with the scripture But with what’s happening in the world today And we’re doing that around three themes: truth (last week), peace (today), and justice (next week)

Last week, we were exploring the 1963 [Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)

This week, I invited you to look at a 1957 sermon entitled [“Loving Your Enemies”](#)

Preached at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, where he pastored from 1954-1960

And he took as his text Matthew 5:43-45, which reads in part – in the translation Dr. King quoted:

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.”

Let’s pray together.

1

Anyone who has ever been in a long term relationship Understands that there are different kinds of silences that can exist between two people

There is the kind of silence that is at once both comfortable and comforting

Where you don't feel the need to fill the space up with words

Then there's a very different kind of silence

The kind of tense, maybe even oppressive silence

Where someone is angry about something

And it's just beneath the surface

But hasn't quite been said yet

Now, if you had a decibel meter to measure sound levels

Both of those situations would read exactly the same

They might even, on the surface, *feel* the same –

Well, at least to *one* of the parties they might feel the same

The one who doesn't yet know what's happening

But they really *aren't* the same, are they?

2

The title of this week's message, "not merely the absence of tension"

Is again a quote from *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*

That describes peace not as what's missing – conflict

But rather what's present – justice

We often settle for a peace where conflict is stifled or ignored

Where what's bothering us doesn't get said or talked about – at least not directly

But that doesn't mean the conflict has gone away, right?

No, it's just gone underground

Black parents were having conversations with their kids about how to handle themselves when stopped by police

Long before Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson

or George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis
or Breonna Taylor was killed in Louisville

Back in 2020, when Black Lives Matter protests were out in the
streets

white people may have suddenly woken up and said, "What is
happening here?"

But the reality is, that these tensions had been there all along

It's just that we prefer the peace that's the absence of tension
To the peace that's the presence of justice

Because it's easier

All it requires of us is a willingness to ignore the truth
A desire to not have the conversation

You see then how truth, and peace and justice are all connected

Which brings me to my first point about peace:
Just because WE don't feel any tension
Doesn't mean SOMEBODY out there isn't feeling it

Remember that couple I told you about earlier?
Peace isn't defined solely by the absence of conflict
Peace is instead a series of choices we have to make everyday

That's the point I want to make with the remainder of my message

3

"Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them...
Live in harmony with one another....
Do not repay anyone evil for evil....
Live peaceably with all....
Never avenge yourselves....

Instead, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink..."

The words – a whole series of imperatives in Romans 12 – are Paul's, but the ideas go back to Jesus

Dr. King said in his sermon on Matthew 5 – the passage that seems to inspire Paul here – the one about loving enemies That he was in the habit of preaching on the passage at least once a year¹

Presumably, because he recognized it as a fundamental source of the Church's moral teaching – and I agree All of Christian peacemaking is rooted in the idea That we must *love* our enemies "Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer," King wrote, "this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization."²

This is not an overstatement

4

In the past two decades, observing the wars that *my* government has entered into in *my* name
Have you ever considered that?
That your government undertakes wars in *your* name?

In the past two decades, I have found it increasingly more difficult to accept that the violence we choose is the path to our collective safety
We're always offered the promise that "a little violence now" will solve the "problem" for good
But does it?

The United States spends more annually on our newly-renamed
War Department

Than the next nine nations combined³

And there is a request on the table to increase that by 50%

From \$900 billion in 2026 to \$1.5 trillion dollars in 2027⁴

The thing about violence is not only that it offers the false hope of
redemption – that a little evil now will avoid more evil later

But also that it's addictive

Once we become accustomed to using it, it requires more and
more to sustain itself

Because we get afraid of what might happen if we let up the
pressure on our enemy

If you have someone in a headlock

You can't help but wonder:

What will they do to me if I let them go?

We trap ourselves in these self-fulfilling cycles until the only thing
that makes sense to us is to destroy the other

“Because,” we tell ourselves, “that’s the only way to be truly safe”

Dr. King was an advocate for nonviolence right up to the end of
his life

He never abandoned his belief in what he taught and preached

And he worked to persuade those in the movement who had lost
faith in the promise and practice of nonviolence

That is a main thrust of his 1968 book – his last – that we'll be
talking about next week, called *Where Do We Go from Here:
Chaos or Community*

He made his appeal for nonviolence even as he admitted his
frustration that the whites who abused and killed civil rights
advocates went unpunished time and time again⁵

And though it cost him in the court of public opinion, Dr. King came out publicly, and vocally, against the war in Vietnam⁶

5

There is a saying that I've become familiar with in recent years:
"There is no way to peace; peace is the way."

The concept is often attributed to figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and A.J. Muste (MUS-tee), a Dutch-American clergyman who was a kind of mentor to Dr. King⁷

And it is kind of hard to wrap your head around when you first hear it – it's like a riddle:
"There is no way to peace; peace is the way."

But the point is this:

So long as we believe that there is a "way" to peace – a path that still remains to be trod – to a place we haven't yet seen

So long as peace is to be found "out there" in some hazy, unclear future

We leave ourselves off the hook

"Not possible" we say

But if we want take seriously the idea that "peace is the way"
That means we need to make different choices

The choice for peace over war:

NEITHER to do violence to one another

NOR to bless wars undertaken in our name

The choice NOT to do violence to our neighbors

But to LOVE them

Even those we consider our enemies

The choice to BLESS even those who persecute us
NOT to repay evil for evil
But to choose MERCY over vengeance

And even beyond mercy, to choose kindness
To feed our enemies when they are hungry
To offer them a drink when they are thirsty

6

These are the choices Jesus calls us to every day
They are the choices of love, which paves of the way of peace

“Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil,” Dr. King wrote in his sermon on “Loving Enemies”⁸

He warned us of the corrosive effects of hate on our own souls:

“When you start hating anybody, it destroys the very center of your creative response to life and the universe; so *love everybody*. Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital center of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective center of your life. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated.” (emphasis added)

I feel like this needs to be double underlined right now
I know a lot of us are angry,
feeling fed up with lies
And absolutely starved for justice

But the thing we cannot do is hate
And here’s why – according to Dr. King:
When we give up on love, we give up on love’s redeeming power⁹

This is the most important lesson we are meant to take from
Jesus' life

That the motivating force in love is its power to redeem
That is the gospel
That is why we are here

Love redeems the prodigal Son
Love redeems the repentant tax collector
And love poured out on the cross redeems us

When the angels proclaimed to the shepherds
"Peace on earth; goodwill to all"
They proclaimed it by virtue of love's redeeming power
It's what we sing, it's what we preach
And it's what we are challenged to practice

7

I want to conclude with a simple appeal: if we want peace, we
need to choose it

And I don't mean the false peace that chooses to ignore the
issues
That remains silent in the face of someone's suffering
Whether interpersonally
Or at the societal level

*We've got to break silence;
But we can't choose violence.*

We choose not to destroy
We choose not to hate
Because it is LOVE – and NOT violence – that is the redemptive power in this world
That is what the church teaches
Because this is the example that Christ has set for us

There is no way to peace.
Peace is the way.
And it's a choice we have to make
Every moment, every day.
Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

² Ibid.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_with_highest_military_expenditures
<https://www.pgpf.org/article/chart-pack-defense-spending/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-us-military-budget-2027-should-be-15-trillion-2026-01-07/>

⁵ King Jr., Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), p.34

⁶ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._J._Muste

⁸ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

⁹ This is Dr. King's third point in his sermon "Loving Enemies."