

**Yearning for Freedom**  
*Letter from Birmingham Jail, Paragraphs 12-24*  
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones  
First Central Congregational UCC  
17 November 2013

He was angry, when he read that the moderate clergy thought he was an extremist. Wouldn't you be too? After all, the radical segregationists had firebombed homes, burned crosses in people's yards, and beat plenty of black people. That was extremism! How could anyone consider what King and his supporters had done to be "extremist?"

But, then, he had second thoughts. Maybe he was an extremist. The kind who stood in fine company with the Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ. Yes, he was an extremist, an extremist for love.

*Agape* love, we are told, is the Christian kind of love. It is godly and unconditional. But sometimes theologians in the past had been a little too sentimental about *agape* love, focusing their attention on good will and charity. Or making it a noble, selfless ideal to which we were to aspire, but which was difficult, if not impossible, for most of us in our daily lives

But Dr. Martin Luther King thought *agape* love was something much more than all of that. According to James McClendon, "King saw *agape* love as aggressive nonviolent direct action, a powerful *force* reaching out toward the alienated enemy."

A powerful force reaching out. That's the kind of love Jesus demonstrated on the cross. And it's the kind of love that King believed would change the world.

It's a challenge, even risky at times. *Agape* love is not for cowards. It actively resists evil and injustice. It exposes the sinfulness of one's opponents. With the goal of compelling repentance.

With their sin exposed, the opponent would be at the mercy of God, seeking forgiveness. The goal was reconciliation -- what Dr. King called "the beloved community."

And this repentance would be brought about through empathy. Dr. King wanted those who read his letter and saw the images on television to enter into black experience, to get a little taste of the suffering, the injustice, the abuse and violence. No one would want to be treated the way that black people were being treated.

King had learned from the parables of Jesus. According to Jonathan Rieder, the lesson King took from Jesus was "You come to the aid of those who suffer; you acknowledge the humanity of every man and woman." To do otherwise, even to sit on the sidelines and do nothing, was sinful.

This empathy with another human being is the source of the moral judgment required to determine what is just and what is unjust. Even when it comes to laws. An unjust law degrades another person, robs them of their rights or their God-given honor. A just law does not do those things. A just law furthers humanity's development, helping us to become better people. A just law has love at its root.

Dr. King criticized the moderate clergy. They were not being true to the doctrines and

practices of their own religion. Either they were hypocrites, or they did not understand their own faith traditions.

But the Civil Rights marchers knew the old stories, knew the old teachings, and believed them. The old biblical stories weren't simply metaphors for noble principles. Nor were they simply historical events of the past. Rather, they believed, with great faith and courage, that God had delivered the people before, and God would deliver the people again. This is faith.

And if one really believes the old, old story of Jesus and his love, then right now, in our lives, it must be a reality.

Dr. King wrote,

Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.

We are "co-workers with God" who must "use time creatively." We are invited into the work of God. All those mighty things like creation, redemption, and forgiveness, these are not things we sit idly by and watch occur around us. They are happening right now, and we are to participate in them.

According to James McClendon, the protestors "discovered that God was with them and they with God already, [they] discovered God in themselves and thereby their own humanity." It was "an experience of God and self at one."

The marchers went forth to love their enemies with a great faith in God, which was also a great faith in themselves. They had awakened to the reality that they were co-workers with God, living in union with God, participating in the great acts of God. Agents of their own deliverance. Their power was in themselves.

Once they claimed that divine power, their yearning for freedom broke forth in extreme acts of *agape* love.

They are examples for us. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it means to love as God loves.

And to quote a great sermon Dr. King preached a short time after this Letter was written,

And if we will work hard and go out with a great faith, we will be able to carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair. And all over this nation, all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to cry out from the hedges and the highways, the villages and the cities, Glory Hallelujah, Glory Hallelujah, his truth is marching on."