



LOVING YOUR ENEMIES

This meditation lifts up Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of loving your enemies.

Overview

Forgiveness cannot be rushed. The practice of forgiveness entails sitting with and struggling through deep feelings. This is neither simplistic nor simple. Usually, it takes an acceptance of oneself, and of one's personal interior timeline. Forgiveness can happen quickly, but more often (especially when the pain, hurt, and anger are significant), it takes a long time. Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr, and many other great saints and spiritual figures, through a tremendous amount of hard work, attempted to love their enemies because they see their enemies for more than just their wrongdoings. When we see our enemies for who God created them to be, love is possible. This practice aims to see others as Jesus sees them, and to cultivate love and compassion for them. When this practice is attempted, it allows us not only to love our so-called "enemies," but it also calls us to develop deep love and compassion for ourselves. (A word of caution: The practice of loving one's enemies is a challenge for anyone. This is especially true if the abuse/oppression is ongoing. The practice of forgiveness has sometimes been co-opted, as a means of diminishing the pain that has been caused, and it has even been used to tacitly encourage oppressive practices to continue; those who have been repeatedly traumatized, particularly people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and other historically oppressed and marginalized groups, often pay the highest price. Never, at any time, should a person feel pushed towards forgiveness.)

Scripture

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Quotations

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with our soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the

midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength To Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 40.

— *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Introducing the Practice

Most everyone in America has some idea of who Martin Luther King Jr. is. He is the civil rights activist who fought for equal rights for African Americans. He is the champion of nonviolent protest. He is the courageous leader who was tragically assassinated. And while many are aware that King was a Baptist minister whose Christian faith influenced his mission to work for equal rights, the role of prayer in King's life isn't discussed as often as the role of social action. Nevertheless, King was a man deeply committed to the practice of prayer, and it was from his prayer that he drew the motivation to accomplish so many great things. Even amidst the busiest times of his life, he regularly set aside time, even full days, for silence and prayer. In prayer, King found the strength, courage, and inner peace to work towards loving his enemies while also actively working to oppose them. Through this deep inner prayer life, King found a way to respond to violence with nonviolence, hate with love, and fear with courage. Martin Luther King Jr. embodies the attitude of Jesus who, when on the cross, prayed for his enemies saying "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." When we open our hearts to the God who is merciful and loving, we too can follow in the example of Martin Luther King Jr. by praying for our enemies and showing them love, even if they continue to show us the opposite.

Preparing for the Practice

Have everyone spread out to find a comfortable place to sit where they can still hear the voice of the person guiding the practice.

The Spiritual Practice

Begin by centering yourself in this present moment. Let go of all the racing thoughts and worries you have about everything going on in your busy life. Be here. (pause for silent reflection)

Now bring to mind the welcoming attitude of Jesus. Think of the way he sees those whom other religious figures have judged as evil or wrong. The way he looks at a prostitute and sees something good in her. The way he looks at a tax collector and sees something good in him. The way he prays that his crucifiers might be forgiven. Jesus looks at these people and sees past their sinful ways. He sees each of them as a beloved child of God. (pause for silent reflection)

Now bring to mind someone who you do not like. Someone with whom you disagree or think is evil. Someone who has wronged you or hurt you. Someone you might call your “enemy.” (pause for silent reflection)

Pause and consider how you are feeling as you remember this person right now. Where is the tenseness in your body? Is your stomach feeling queasy? Is your back tight? How clenched is your jaw. Take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out.

These emotions are real. If you are feeling anxious, angry, or sad, sit there. Stay with them. These emotions are real, and they come from a place of deep being.

Jesus may love your enemy. Jesus might interact with your enemy with a sense of compassion and connection. If this resonates for you, I invite you to lean into that image, ponder over it. If this makes you more upset, then stop. Turn away from that image. Return to breathing in, and breathing out. (Pause.)

Forgiveness takes time. When our spirits are not ready, pushing such a practice has been shown to be ineffective, and actually can do great harm. If you feel inner anxiety around forgiveness, that’s okay. Return to a place of inner safety. Breathe in, breathe out. The Spirit is breath, and is life, and will fill your body with what you need to live right now. Not back when you were wronged, not in the future, but right now, in this safe place.

Know that Jesus did not ignore sin or evil behavior. When horrible things happen, Jesus does not turn a blind eye to such things. Nor did Martin Luther King Jr. brush aside the wrongdoing that he saw his enemies doing. Seeing through the eyes of Jesus does not mean disregarding sin; it means recognizing that we are called to transformation, and transformation at our own pace. Each child of God is defined by the love of God that created them; that includes you. Yes, you. By loving yourself for who you were created to be rather than hating and judging your feelings, or your path toward forgiveness, you remember the inner gift from God: the gift of compassion. (pause for silent reflection)

Amen.

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Discussion Questions

1. How was this practice for you? Was it challenging?
2. Were you able to see your “enemy” through Jesus’ eyes or was that too challenging? If not, were you able to have compassion on yourself? That practice stirs us towards deeper transformation, which will eventually impact how we see others.