

# ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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*A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021

### We Must Begin With Love: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Unity Grounded in Justice

By Teresa Hord Owens

*Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love – which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies – is the solution to the race problem.*

~Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

~John 13:34-35, NRSV

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

~John 15:5, NRSV

The work and words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., continue to be an important source of inspiration for people around the world. However, the power of his witness and his word are grounded in a deep theological commitment to the teaching of Jesus Christ, and moreover in a vision of how those teachings can be the foundation for nonviolence, racial and social justice, and the building of what King described as “the Beloved Community.”

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Christians in particular must reclaim this theological and biblical understanding of Dr. King as an example of what it means to live the Gospel. We must begin with love.

For Christians, love is more than just an ethical principle; Jesus tells us it is the greatest commandment. We are to love God, and we are also to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus raises the bar, so to speak, in his final discourse in the gospel of John. He gives a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34). I am convicted by the magnitude of that commandment when I reflect on the magnitude of Jesus' own love. Indeed, Jesus' very presence among us is a reflection of God's limitless love, if we believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine. To love one another as Jesus has loved is a tall order, indeed. But it is, says Jesus, the evidence that others will have that we are his disciples (John 13:35). If others are to be able to witness this love, it must be more than words, more than platitudes, more than empty expressions.

In John 15:5, Jesus tells his disciples that only if they "abide" in him, are rooted and grounded in his presence and example, will they be able to bear the fruits of love. And what are these fruits? Not, clearly, a promise always to like our neighbor or agree with our neighbor. The human condition guarantees that we will have conflict, not least because

we desire to identify with those who are most like us and join ourselves with them, making our similarity the basis for allegiance. If we abide in Jesus, however, we are rooting ourselves in something more powerful than these instincts. When Dr. King makes his wonderful case for abiding in love, and for nonviolence as the methodology that springs from love, it is not because that way is easy, but because it is the only way to bear the fruit of reconciliation and Beloved Community.

Love keeps us properly oriented as followers of Jesus insofar as it keeps us focused on our neighbor. This is more crucial than ever, because in today's polarized society, it is hard for many of us even to comprehend how those with whom we disagree can believe and act as they do. Some understand Christianity in ways that enmesh it with nationalism, not only privileging patriotism as a moral necessity but also naming particular forms of Christian dogma as the only suitable expressions of that patriotism. Others encounter the teachings of Christianity primarily as spiritual grounding for their existing stances on the social, cultural, or political issues that matter to them. When we are so focused on our own immediate needs or preferences, failing to see and understand how systemic violence continues to degrade our neighbor, we are not abiding in Jesus, and we are not loving as he loves. To imagine God's limitless love in action is to imagine a new world where Jesus' commandment to love one another can be realized and where our decisions are based on what will benefit us all.

The failure to abide in Jesus is seen also in widespread biblical illiteracy among Christians, and often in a lack of theological reflection on how what we say and do bears (authentic or hypocritical) witness to that commandment to love as Jesus as loved us. We focus more on what political parties and influential persons are saying than on what it would require of us to abide in Jesus' love and, from that grounded place, to make the choices necessary to build a world consistent with that love. That is why Christians must be grounded in the biblical and theological understanding of who Jesus is and how Jesus calls us to live. Jesus himself warns, "apart from me you can do nothing." Love must

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### **Ecumenical Trends**

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be a commitment to living in accordance with the value of our neighbor, not just a habit of speaking about this value. If we are abiding in Jesus, and he is in us, the decisions we make every day are guided by our neighbor's priority of place in our lives. Otherwise, we are not being accountable to the very essence of Jesus' teaching, and we will not have the spiritual resources necessary to build the Beloved Community in our world.

Dr. King's dream of the Beloved Community is a reflection of his own deep abiding in Jesus, rooting himself in both the value of love and, more importantly, the way of love. The depth of Dr. King's commitment to this way of love in order to bring reconciliation was not fully understood in his own lifetime, and it is not well understood even now. We know from the history of the world (especially in places such as South Africa and indeed the United States) that until we tell the truth about injustice, name our complicity in it, and recognize the societal costs that must be paid to repair it, reconciliation cannot happen. Even when we pass laws to inhibit oppressive actions, we will still not have dealt with the state of our hearts and minds. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia are real and evident throughout our society. If we as Christians are offering a way forward, it must be the road of love. We must understand that love fuels not just mercy but justice, for only justice ensures that our neighbor is valued no less than we value ourselves. When we abide in Jesus' love, we have the spiritual resources, those fruits of the Spirit, that equip us not only to show compassion but also and especially to demand that justice prevails, doing the hard work of dismantling forms of oppression that harm our neighbor.

As we pray for unity, we must remember that we will not be able to live in unity without grounding what we believe, who we are, and how we engage the world in that commandment to abide in this limitless love of God, revealed through Jesus Christ, to which Jesus commands us to be faithful. Unity is a gift from God, yes, but it requires that we live into it, making space in ourselves for it. Unity is

not a state of total agreement, but rather a state of honoring all that we each are. If we believe in God, we must acknowledge God's limitless love for all beings, a love that defines who God is. We as creatures of this loving God cannot limit or define exceptions to that love without limiting God – which we simply have no right or authority to do. And if we are truly abiding in the teachings and the love of Jesus Christ, we will understand that there are some roads that love simply cannot take. Love cannot take the road of racism, misogyny, homophobia, or xenophobia. Love cannot turn a blind eye to poverty, and it demands that we take the road where all have enough and can flourish as our Creator intended. Love must be taken seriously, beyond platitudes, insisting that our work together is dedicated to cultivating its fruit.

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Dr. King spoke to us from a place of deep abiding, a place that he understood must ground all that Christians believe and do. The path of nonviolence, the work of reconciliation, the commitment to love – all begin with a deep commitment to understanding and obeying this commandment from Jesus. Such commitment will require that we continually ask ourselves how we are valuing one another in ways that enable our society and its institutions also to value each one of us in tangible ways. Such commitment is the fruit of our abiding in Jesus. This commitment will ground us in the limitless love of God as reflected in Jesus, and it will hold us accountable to the work of justice and reconciliation as we build the Beloved Community. Without this commitment, without our abiding, we can do nothing, and we cannot bear the fruit that Jesus calls us to bear. But when we abide in love, we are equipped to walk the often-bumpy road that leads us to truth, reconciliation, healing, and justice. 