

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Satyagraha = ‘Soul Force’”

Isaiah 49:1-7; I Corinthians 1:1-9;

John 1:29-42

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By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 2, January 19, 2013, dedicated to the memory of David Loy, in thanksgiving for the gift of our sound system given by Bill and Natalie Wright and dedicated today and to Moses, Jesus, Coretta Scott and Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Oscar Romero and all satyagrahis through the ages who have lived out the principles of soul force in the face of hatred, violence, and war and always to the glory of God!

“Satyagraha = ‘Soul Force’”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The making of a man named Martin Luther King, Jr. has been a study to which I have been dedicated since my youth. Let me reflect upon “Soul Force” in the teachings and actions of Dr. King today.

Martin was born, January 15, 1929. Had he lived, he would have been 85 years old four days ago (the same age that Anne Frank would have been this year if she had lived). Martin was raised in a fundamentalist Baptist preacher’s home in Atlanta, Georgia, educated as a teenager at Morehouse College (age 15-19) - one of America’s preeminent male-only African-American colleges in Atlanta. With his degree in sociology, Martin went north to Rochester, New York where he graduated at the head of his class at 22 years old from Colgate-Rochester Theological Seminary. From CRTS, he went to Boston University where he received his PhD in philosophy at the age of 26. He was finishing writing his dissertation when he was called to serve the prestigious Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL in October, 1954. He became their 20th pastor – and to this day – their most famous pastor (although they have had some great ones).

One year and two months later, at the age of 26 ½, he was chosen to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott – which was motivated by the arrest of Ms. Rosa Parks on a city bus, December 1, 1955. This 381 day boycott was to become the catalyst for the most significant non-violent resistance movement in American history – the Civil Rights Movement. By 34 Martin became the youngest recipient

of the Nobel Peace Prize. He went on to lead the civil rights movement until his death by assassination, April 4, 1968, at the age of 39. At the time of his death, Martin was leading a sanitation workers strike in Memphis, TN. Because he laid down his life defending sanitation workers, I believe no municipality in this nation should ever collect garbage on MLK Day.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used his philosophical studies of Kant, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, coupled with his theological studies of Niebuhr and Tillich, his sociological and racial political readings in WE DuBois and joined them with his social gospel studies of Rauschenbusch and Gladden and tied all of this together by integrating the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets with the strategic and soulful Gandhian concepts and practices of satyagraha or soul force to spark the civil rights movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's into the most peaceful and radically transformative social movement of American history. He did all of this by the age of 25.

People of God – soak this in! It is mind (and spirit) boggling.

Martin was brilliant, passionate, clear, prayerful, strategic, quiet at times and at times provocative, powerful, erudite as a preacher, speaker, teacher, and author – a man who opened the eyes, ears, hearts and minds of America and the global community– white, black, brown, all the colors of the human rainbow. He got the feet and the voices of America to use “satyagraha” or “soul force” as the way to overcome hatred, violence, and evil.

But what was **Satyagraha**?

Satyagraha loosely translates as "insistence on truth" (*satya* 'truth'; *agraha* 'insistence') or "soul force" or "truth force," is a particular philosophy and practice within the broader overall category generally known as nonviolent resistance or civil resistance. The term "satyagraha" was created and developed by Mahatma Gandhi. He deployed satyagraha in the Indian independence movement and also during his earlier struggles in South Africa for Indian rights. Satyagraha theory influenced Nelson Mandela's struggle in South Africa under apartheid, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s and James Bevel's campaigns during the civil rights movement in the United States, and many other social justice movements. Mel White – who is coming to our pulpit three weeks from today – has used “soul force” in his nonviolent struggles within the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) movement in our times.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote of Satyagraha:

Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement Satyagraha, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance”, in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word “satyagraha” itself or some other equivalent English phrase. (M.K. Gandhi, Satyagraha in South Africa, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1111, pp. 109–10).

Gandhi described “satyagraha” as follows:

*I have also called it love-force or soul-force. In the application of satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one’s opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and compassion. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself (Gandhi, M.K. Statement to Disorders Inquiry Committee January 5, 1920 satyagrahi valvuloplasty (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 19, p. 206).*

*Passive resistance is different from Satyagraha in three essentials: Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatsoever; and it ever insists upon truth (Gandhi, M.K. “Letter to Mr. —” 25 January 1920 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 19, p. 350).*

*The Satyagrahi’s object is to convert, not to coerce, the wrong-doer.” Success is defined as cooperating with the opponent to meet a just end that the opponent is unwittingly obstructing. The opponent must be converted, at least as far as to stop obstructing the just end, for this cooperation to take place (Mohandas K. Gandhi, letter to P. Kodanda Rao, 10 September 1935; in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, electronic edition, vol. 67, p. 400).*

The theory of Satyagraha sees means and ends as inseparable. The means used to obtain an end are wrapped up in and attached to that end. Therefore, it is contradictory to try to use unjust means to obtain justice or to try to use violence to obtain peace. As Gandhi wrote: “*They say, ‘means are, after all, means’. I would say, ‘means are, after all, everything’. As the means so the end...*” (Gandhi, M.K. “Brute Force”, Chapter XVI of *Hind Swaraj*, 1909 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 10, p. 287).

The essence of Satyagraha is that it seeks to eliminate antagonisms without harming the antagonists themselves, as opposed to violent resistance, which is meant to cause harm to the antagonist. A Satyagrahi therefore does not seek to end or destroy the relationship with the antagonist, but instead seeks to transform or “purify” it to a higher level. Sometimes you will hear of “Satyagraha” as a “silent force” or a “soul force” (a term used by Martin Luther King Jr. during his famous “*I Have a Dream*” speech). “Soul Force” always arms the individual with moral power rather than physical power. Satyagraha is also termed a “universal force,” as it essentially “makes no distinction between kinsmen and strangers, young and old, man and woman, friend and foe” (Gandhi, M.K. “Some Rules of Satyagraha” *Young India (Navajivan)* 23 February 1930 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 48, p. 340).

Satyagraha campaigns led by Gandhi were highly disciplined. No one could be in the campaigns unless they were trained in the principles and tested by fire. These 19 rules were a constant driver for Gandhi and applied by King later in the Civil Rights movement. All satyagrahis had to sign-off on these rules of engagement. Listen carefully to these rules written in 1930.

Rules for satyagraha campaigns:

1. harbor no anger
2. suffer the anger of the opponent
3. never retaliate to assaults or punishment; but do not submit, out of fear of punishment or assault, to an order given in anger
4. voluntarily submit to arrest or confiscation of your own property
5. if you are a trustee of property, defend that property (non-violently) from confiscation with your life
6. do not curse or swear
7. do not insult the opponent
8. neither salute nor insult the flag of your opponent or your opponent’s leaders
9. if anyone attempts to insult or assault your opponent, defend your opponent (non-violently) with your life
10. as a prisoner, behave courteously and obey prison regulations (except any that are contrary to self-respect)
11. as a prisoner, do not ask for special favorable treatment
12. as a prisoner, do not fast in an attempt to gain conveniences whose deprivation does not involve any injury to your self-respect
13. joyfully obey the orders of the leaders of the civil disobedience action

14. do not pick and choose amongst the orders you obey; if you find the action as a whole improper or immoral, sever your connection with the action entirely
15. do not make your participation conditional on your comrades taking care of your dependents while you are engaging in the campaign or are in prison; do not expect them to provide such support
16. do not become a cause of communal quarrels
17. do not take sides in such quarrels, but assist only that party which is demonstrably in the right; in the case of inter-religious conflict, give your life to protect (non-violently) those in danger on either side
18. avoid occasions that may give rise to communal quarrels
19. Do not take part in processions that would wound the religious sensibilities of any community (Gandhi, M.K. "Some Rules of Satyagraha" *Young India (Navajivan)* 23 February 1930 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 48, p. 340).

Of Gandhi and Satyagraha, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote near the end of his life:

*Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi, but I had never studied him seriously. As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. I was particularly moved by his Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of Satyagraha (Satya is truth which equals love, and agraha is force; Satyagraha, therefore, means truth force or love force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. ... It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking (King, Jr., Martin Luther (1998). Carson, Clayborne, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* pp. 23–24. ISBN 0-446-52412-3).*

In his book, *Holy Terror: Lies the Christian Right Tells us to Deny Gay Equality* (Magnus Books, NY. NY, 2006), The Rev. Dr. Mel White tells the story of transformation he experienced when buried in the bitterness and anger of engagement with the religious right about LGBT concerns. Living in Texas at the time, Mel was overcome by the hatred of the religious right and the "war they were waging" and their foot-soldiers were fighting through the murder and devastation of gay people all across the country.

Called upon by the Human Rights Campaign to give a speech at their annual conference in 1994, Mel was struggling with what to say about the hatred and violence he was witnessing all around him. On his regular morning walk with his farm dogs Bud and Maggie, Mel had a life changing experience. As he walked, he felt the presence of Jesus walking with him. But, not only Jesus, he felt the presence of all his heroes and sheroes walking with him: Moses and Hebrew poets and prophets, Gandhi, Bonheoffer, Dag Hammarskjold, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, and Audre Lorde. He felt they were present with him and to him and looking into his soul. He said out loud, *“What do I say to all the activists out on the front lines for justice? What new insight or inspiration can I share with them that will help them in their struggle for justice?”* He writes:

Surrounded by the smiling, impatient, slightly irritated spirits of these men and women who had suffered in the course of their seeking justice for their own oppressed peoples, suddenly I knew the answer they would give.

“Tell them,” they would say in one strong voice, “that we must learn to out-love our enemies.” With that sudden insight, they were all gone. I was alone on the road again. “Out-love our enemies?” That is it?...” (p. 330).

Feeling vulnerable and feeling like a fool before the room of activists at the Human Rights Campaign convention, Mel went on to give that speech and when he told this story and shared the insight given by the Spirits of Justice and Peace. The room overflowing with activists became silent. Tears began to fill the eyes of older gay and lesbian activists. “Out love our enemies.....” That is message of Jesus, King, Gandhi and White (Ibid, p.331).

Yesterday, I opened the paper to read about the violent death of Dennis McGuire in Lucasville Prison – taking more than 15 minutes. As I read Andrew Welsh-Huggins’ eye-witness account of the execution, all I could think was wrong this was. We, the citizens of the State of Ohio, executed McGuire for his violent 1989 murder of Joy Stewart and her baby. It was gruesome death which was our state’s response to a gruesome murder.

Further on the paper talked about more violent deaths in our area that happened this week, 16 people killed in an attack on a Kabul restaurant, the defrocking of 400 priests in two years for sexually molesting children, and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s comments anti-gay comments to volunteers preparing to welcome the world to his anti-gay and anti-human rights country for the Winter Olympics. Violence was everywhere in the news. It always is.

I was thinking about Dr. King, the power of nonviolence and “soul force” as I read the news. I was thinking about Mel White’s comment about out-loving our enemies. Our world needs a better answer to violence than violence. As Dr. King once said, “an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth will leave the world blind and toothless.” I hope that you take time this weekend to read or listen to Dr. King’s sermons. They are ALL on-line. Take time to reflect on our societal view that it is right to kill people to prove that killing people is wrong.

Take time to pray about, reflect upon and respond to “soul force” in your life. Consider the view that Jesus first spoke of – to love your enemy or as Mel White has added, “we have to out-love our enemies.”

Some would say that loving our enemy is the luxury we have for living in a democracy. I believe loving our enemy is the only way out of a cycle of violence which continues to spiral out of control. May God bless you all on this Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Weekend. May you come to know that this brilliant beam of God’s light who came down from heaven to earth for 39 years continues to shine God’s light on a soulful truth of living and loving which will not end.

The darkness will not overcome the light – this is the promise of God in Christ Jesus our Savior. Amen.

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