

Was Jesus a Practitioner of Nonviolence? Reading through Mark 1:21-3:19 and Martin Luther King

Rev. James W. Lawson, a retired Methodist minister in his 80s now, has been a major figure in faith-based activism in the U.S.¹ One of Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest colleagues in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Lawson continues to work tirelessly in the tradition of nonviolent activism for social justice. Speaking at a King commemoration recently in Los Angeles he said something that caught my theological attention.

“If you want to understand King,” Lawson asserted, “you must look at Jesus.” He was acknowledging that King was a committed Christian disciple who understood the call of the gospel as a vocation of advocacy for the oppressed, of love for adversaries and of nonviolent resistance to injustice. King can’t be understood apart from his faith: he organized his movement in church basements, prayed as he picketed, sang gospel hymns in jail, preached to presidents, and challenged other church leaders to join him (most poignantly in his 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”). But Lawson was saying more than this. He was alluding to the undeniable, if uncomfortable, parallels between the Jesus story and the ministry of Dr. King.

Like King, Jesus was a member of an ethnic community that suffered great discrimination at the hands of a world power. Both of them:

- o spent time listening to the pain of the dispossessed and broken among their own people, and advocating on their behalf;
- o worked to build popular movements of identity, renewal and resistance to injustice;

¹ For a brief biography of this remarkable person, see www.wagingpeace.org/menu/programs/youth-outreach/peace-heroes/lawson-jim.htm

- o proclaimed the vision of God's "Beloved Community" in ways that got them into trouble with both local and national authorities;
- o were widely perceived as operating in the biblical prophetic tradition by both allies and adversaries;
- o animated dramatic public protests resulting in arrest and jail;
- o were deemed such a threat to national security that their inner circles were infiltrated by government informers; and
- o in the end, were killed through an official conspiracy because of their work and witness.

These parallels have been oddly absent from longstanding, abstract theological debates as to whether or not Jesus was a "pacifist," or whether he was politically engaged, and are thus worth exploring.

King not only looked to Jesus; if we want to understand this greatest of figures in the history of social change in the U.S., we must look at Jesus. It strikes me that the converse also applies, however: If we want to understand Jesus, we would do well to look at King. Indeed, the more I study the civil rights movement, the more the gospels come alive. Remembering the challenges that Dr. King faced trying to build a social movement for racial justice in the teeth of the hostile system of American apartheid can help us re-imagine how difficult it must have been for Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God in a world dominated by imperial Rome two thousand years ago.

Most Christians, of course, tend to think of Jesus in a highly spiritualized, even romanticized way, ignoring the fact that he lived and died in times that were as contentious and conflicted as our own. The Nazarene's world was not the fantasy-scape we so often imagine the Bible to inhabit. It was tough terrain, not so unlike that of the U.S. in 1968: a world of racial discrimination and class conflict, of imperial wars abroad and political repression at home, all presided over by a political leadership that (directly or indirectly) engineered the demise of the prophet, then issued stern but pious calls for law and order in the wake of his "tragic death."

In order to move the theological conversation about Jesus and violence beyond the favorite prooftexts of pacifists (e.g. Mt 26:52) and non-pacifists (e.g. Lk 22:36), we might ask whether the Jesus story can be read coherently as a narrative of a sort of King-style active nonviolence? King, of course, drew his strategic inspiration from Gandhi, who used the term Satyagraha to describe his campaigns. It connoted “the force of truth” that was both personal and political, and was militant but not military in its engagement with traditions and structures of oppression.² This explains why public figures such as Jesus, Gandhi or King, although eulogized in retrospect as great “peacemakers,” were in fact accused in their own time of being “disturbers of the peace.” The reality of social change is that in order for prevailing conditions of injustice within a system to be changed they must be first articulated. Thus before conflict can be resolved it must first be provoked. One can see just such provocation in ministry of Jesus; I will take as an example Mark’s narrative of Jesus’ early work in Galilee (Mk 1:21-3:14).³

The careful reader of Mark’s gospel might well wonder why the local authorities are, as early as Mk 3:6, already plotting to execute Jesus! This is after only a few weeks of public ministry, and long before he has marched on the capital city, overturned tables in the Temple and called for its demise (Mk 11:1-23, 13:2)! What is it about his teaching, exorcism and healing work that threatens those in power? To discern this, we must briefly review the components of Jesus’ first “campaign” in and around Capernaum.

In Jesus’ very first public action (Mk 1:21-29) conflict erupts in an exorcism in the Capernaum synagogue. In a setting that represents the heart of the local social order, the story is structurally framed by the reaction of the crowd:

- o 1:22: And the crowd was astonished at Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, unlike the scribes.

² For the classic texts see Mohandas Gandhi, Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha), Mineola, NY:Dover edition, 2001; Joan Bondurant, The Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict, Berkeley, Univ. of California, 1971.

³ For a detailed treatment of this narrative sequence see my Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus, Orbis, 1988, chapter four.

- o 1:27: And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him!"

This refrain articulates the central issue: who exercises authority in this communal space? Sandwiched in between is an unclean spirit who protests Jesus' presence: "Why do you meddle with us?" (1:23f; see Jdg 11:12, 1 Kg 17:18). The demon's defiance quickly however turns to fear: "Have you come to destroy us?" Who is the "we" on whose behalf the demon speaks? Mark's framing device suggests he represents the voice of the scribal class whose "space" Jesus is invading. The synagogue on the Sabbath is their turf, where they teach Torah; this "spirit," then, seems to personify scribal power. Only after "exorcising" their sway over the hearts and minds of the people is Jesus free to begin his compassionate ministry to the masses (1:29-34).

In 1:35-39 Jesus withdraws from the public struggle for a time of prayer and refocusing his mission. Spiritual practices of centering and contemplation are characteristic of all great nonviolent leaders, and are crucial to being able to resist the pressures to compromise, or aggrandize, or just give up.

Jesus returns to action when challenged by a leper to "declare him clean" (1:40-45). Jesus' willingness to have social contact with this leper is subversive enough, given the impurity and its contagion. But given the fact that both diagnosis and cure for skin diseases was the exclusive prerogative of priests (Lev 13-14), it is Jesus' intervention here (as an "unlicensed practitioner") that is really problematic. In the epilogue to the story, Jesus further empowers the leper by dispatching him to "make a witness against" the priestly system by paying for services not rendered (1:44). He is not up to this "protest," however, and instead turns it into a spectacle, causing Jesus to have to go underground (1:45).

Similarly, in Mk 2:1-12 Jesus' encounter with a physically disabled man is turned into a debate about sin. Rather than simply "curing" his body, Jesus chooses to challenge the official protocols by unilaterally releasing him from sin / debt (2:5,7). The scribes object, claiming that only God

can forgive (2:7). But this is a defense of their own social power (since as interpreters of Torah they actually adjudicate sin / debt), not of God's sovereignty. Jesus ignores their warning, and the healing becomes the first directly defiant action that asserts his counter-authority (2:10).

To understand why this pair of healings engender so much hostility from the local authorities we must consider the "social map" of Second Temple Judean culture. It consisted of two, mutually re-inforcing Codes: Purity and Debt. The Purity code, adjudicated by priests, established what was clean and unclean in order to maintain ethnic group and class boundaries. One's Purity status was determined by birth (e.g. tribal affiliation), body (male or female, disabled or "healthy") and behavior (cultic obligations). Debt and sin, on the other hand, which were virtually interchangeable terms were under the jurisdiction of the scribal class. The Law regulated individual and social responsibilities, criminal behavior, and economic rules, determining sins of commission (stealing an ox or adultery) and omission (not paying tithes or observing the Sabbath). It is important to remember that there was no differentiation between the "sacred" and "secular" in this system.

In other words, in these two stories we are dealing with the "health-care" and the "criminal justice" systems respectively, and Jesus is challenging how power was distributed within them. Who interpreted the Purity or Debt codes (the power of diagnosis)? Who was able to effect a change in someone's status in that system (the power of treatment)? And what did "treatment" or "forgiveness" cost the one who was impure or indebted? We can begin to see that when Jesus breaks the rules or engages in debates with the priests or scribes, who are senior administrators of and spokespersons for the status quo, he is involved in social criticism. Later, when he challenges the Temple cult itself, he is subverting political authority. Such practices are obviously threatening to those whose social status and national identity is bound to the dominant cultural Codes and structures of the Temple-State.

These two stories are characteristic of all of Jesus' healings in Mark: he intervenes on behalf of the "political bodies" of the sick or possessed in a way that always raises larger questions of justice in the "body politic."

Jesus seeks the root causes of why people are marginalized, so his healing and exorcism ministry also unmask causes of social oppression. Thus these healings will be interpreted either as liberation (by the crowds) or lawless defiance (by the authorities) depending upon one's commitment to or place within the prevailing social order.

Three consecutive food controversies now follow, in which the issues are: who disciples eat with; when not to eat; and where and what food is appropriate to eat. These are keenly political issues in a culture in which table fellowship was the primary indicator of social intercourse and status, and they each illustrate an aspect of what I call "Sabbath economics."⁴ In the story of Levi, debtors and debt collectors share extraordinary "Jubilee" table fellowship (2:15f). In the fasting debate Jesus pits a banquet metaphor against ritual piety, arguing that the poor need shared abundance, not religious abstinence (2:18f). And the grainfield episode (2:23-28) dramatizes Jesus' argument that the Sabbath ethic endorses the right of hungry people to glean food (Ex 23:11f; Lev 23:22; 25:35,37) despite laws that might restrict such access.

The settings of these episodes represent what today we call the economic sphere: in a traditional agricultural society the table was the primary site of consumption, the field of production. This series can be read as a protest over the politics of food in Palestine, in which the authorities (primarily here the Pharisees) control distribution. Jesus' clinching argument can be properly paraphrased as "The economy was made for humans, not humans for the economy," or more simply in contemporary parlance, "Food for people, not for profit" (2:28).

We can now understand why by the second synagogue showdown (Mk 3:1-6) the elites want Jesus neutralized. It is structured as a kind of trial scene: in the public glare the political authorities stand poised, ready for the suspect to "cross the line" (3:2). In a sort of Deuteronomic ultimatum (Dt 30:15ff), however, Jesus turns from defendant to prosecutor (3:4). In the classic tradition of civil disobedience, Jesus then proceeds to break the law in order to raise deeper issues about the moral health of the

⁴ For more on this see my The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics, Church of the Savior Press, 2001.

community (3:5). This form of “speaking truth to power” will have costly consequences in the story, of course, and to prepare his Spirit for the greater showdowns to come Jesus concludes this campaign with another withdrawal (3:7) in order to reflect on the mission and build community (3:14ff).

We see in this narrative sequence a Jesus who experiences the incessant press of needy “crowds” (mentioned some 38 times in Mark). Indeed, economic and political forces in the decades prior to the Roman-Jewish war had dispossessed significant portions of the Palestinian population. Illness and disability were an inseparable part of the cycle of poverty for the poor, as they still are today. Jesus demonstrates an emphatic bias towards these disenfranchised people and endeavors to “articulate” the problems structurally in his interventions, which in turn threatens the entrenched interests of the elites.

Jesus’ practice of militant nonviolence becomes even clearer later in Mark’s story of the Jerusalem narrative, from the subversive “street theater” of his entry into the capital (11:1-10) to his “blockade” of the Temple (11:11-25). He interrogates every level of political authority (11:27-12:17), yet issues a sharp rebuke to those who imagine that only war can overthrow the regime (13:5-13), inviting his disciples to instead face the consequences for speaking truth to Power (13:9-13). And of course he himself models this Way, as he is arrested, put on trial and executed as a dissident (14-15). But it is Mark’s firm conviction that the cross of Jesus is the only weapon powerful enough to prevail over the Powers and transform the world; this is why every disciple is commissioned to take up the Way of nonviolence (Mk 8:34ff).

This nonviolent but militant Jesus is, of course, a far cry from the stained glass window Christ we encounter in our churches. Interestingly, the same could be said of Martin King. His legacy has been widely domesticated today in the U.S., with a national holiday and countless streets and schools named after him. King is routinely portrayed in official prayer breakfasts as a lovable, harmless icon of peace and tolerance, his message typically reduced to a vague and sentimental sound-byte—“I have a dream.” But the historic King, like

the historic Jesus, was prophetic in every sense of the word. His oratory was often polarizing, and his campaigns of civil disobedience upsetting to the status quo.

Like Jesus, King was deeply impacted by the plight of the poor he encountered in his advocacy work. This caused him to move from a strictly civil rights agenda to a deeper questioning of war and poverty. We see this most clearly in his famous "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence" speech, delivered to a gathering of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about the War in Vietnam on April 4, 1967 at the Riverside Church in New York.⁵ By then a famous civil rights leader, having already been awarded the Nobel prize for his work, King here publicly articulated his opposition to the Vietnam War for the first time, against the advice of his closest circle. His incisive analysis of the "giant triplets" that plague American life and politics—racism, militarism and poverty—continues to be relevant to this day.⁶ At the time, however, government authorities—most notably the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover—were furious that King had joined his considerable moral authority to the anti-war movement. It is not surprising, then, that exactly one year later almost to the hour, King was gunned down in Memphis.⁷

Rev. Jim Lawson, a disciple of King who was a disciple of Jesus, reminds us that to challenge the powerful in the name of the poor is always both controversial and costly, whether in 1st century Palestine or 21st century America. Both the historic Jesus and King are highly inconvenient for a nation that has canonized and then ignored them. We are, after all, far more comfortable with dead prophets than living ones, honoring them publicly only after they are safely disposed of. Jesus understood this tendency all too well: "Woe to you!" he warned,

⁵ The text and an audio excerpt can be found at: www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/beyondvietnam.htm.

⁶ One of the best accounts of this history is David Garrow's Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Perennial, 1999).

⁷ Noted Catholic theologian James W. Douglass has closely followed the debate of who killed King, and summarized it in "The Martin Luther King Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis," Probe, Spring 2000, available online at: www.ratical.org/ratville/JFK/MLKconExp.html.

"who build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed"
(Luke 11:47).

At the end of their lives, Jesus and King were each hemmed in by all the factions of their respective political terrains. They had to navigate death threats from without, dissent from within their own movements, and had as colleagues only a relatively tiny group of feckless companions. But that is how it always is struggling for the Kingdom of God in a world held hostage by tyrants, terrorists, militarists, and kingpins, unaided by ambivalent religious leaders and insular academics and utterly distracted young folks. Despite all this, however, both Jesus and King chose nonviolent love without compromising their insistence upon justice.⁸ They believed that the movement for God's Beloved Community was worth giving their lives to—and they invite us to do the same.

⁸ I want to be clear that I am not contending that Jesus was “just” a nonviolent martyr, nor that Martin King is the resurrected Savior of the world! There is more to the N.T. story than what I have focused on here, and King was a disciple, not the Master. I am simply arguing that there are significant aspects of Jesus’ ministry as portrayed in the gospels that can only coherently be understood through the lens of the kind of nonviolent activism embodied by e.g. King and Gandhi—aspects that are forever overlooked by theologians and churchgoers.