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| **[3 MLK quotes that convict me today](http://www.christenacleveland.com/2015/01/3-mlk-jr-quotes-that-convict-me-today/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**by [christena](http://www.christenacleveland.com/?author=1" \t "_blank) |

*All quotes are taken from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's essay*[An Experiment in Love](http://library.sau.edu/CommUniv/experiment.pdf) *(1958) which he wrote to describe the nonviolent philosophy behind the Montgomery bus boycott.*

**1.**

*A fifth point regarding nonviolent resistance is that it avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. The nonviolent resistor not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him.*

This idea goes hand-in-hand with a book that is absolutely slaying me right now: Miroslav Volf's [The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World](http://www.amazon.com/The-End-Memory-Remembering-Rightly/dp/0802829899). In it, Volf reminds us that for evil to fully triumph, two acts of evil must be committed. The perpetrator must commit an evil act and the victim must return an evil act in response to the first act. What both MLK and Volf make clear is that the victim's contribution to the triumph of evil doesn't have to take a behavioral form. Indeed, it doesn't even have to be spoken. Evil can manifest itself in thoughts (e.g., self-righteousness), emotions (e.g., resentment), and, as Volf brilliantly describes in his book, memories (e.g., skewed recollections that dehumanize the perpetrator).

Last month when I was in Haifa (northern Israel), I spoke with a Palestinian activist who said that resorting to violence even once, as a one-time exception to the rule, is a mistake because once violence is committed it "stays with you, even after the liberation." Those of us who have been victimized know how easy it is to justify a violent behavior, thought, emotion or memory *just this once because it's the only way I can cope with this evil*. It's so important for me to remember that I too can help evil triumph in lasting ways.

**2.**

*We speak of a love which is expressed in the Greek word agape. Agapemeans understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. Agape is a disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor.Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. It is entirely “neighbor-regarding concern for others,” which discovers the neighbor in every man it meets. Therefore, agape makes no distinction between friend and enemy; it is directed toward both.*

MLK challenges us one step further by saying that in addition to not hating those who oppress us we must prophetically love them, even before they seemingly deserve it.  The key to this is seeing oppressors as neighbors. When we "discover the neighbor in every man" we are choosing to identify with them, using our common humanity as the basis that guides our interaction.

I love that MLK uses the term *neighbor* because it implies geographical closeness. This is interesting because at the beginning of his essay, he mentions that the Sermon on the Mount initially fueled the nonviolent movement toward integration and reconciliation in Montgomery, AL. Coincidentally, I recently heard Fr. Greg Boyle say that the Sermon on the Mount "isn't a spirituality, it's a geography." It tells us how to interact with others, who to spend time with, and where to physically situate ourselves in the social world. This geographical landscape inverts the unjust power structure (Matt. 5:1-12), doesn't allow resentment to impede reconciliation (Matt. 5:21-26), makes great space for mercy (Matt. 5:7), empowers those who speak out for justice (Matt. 5:9, 14-16), is nonviolent and non-retaliatory (Matt:5:38-42), calls its inhabitants to actively march toward enemies in love (Matt. 5:43-48), and resists materialism (Matt. 6:19-21).

 It is striking to me that it was the Sermon on the Mount that first inspired MLK and others to re-envision the geography of the family of God. Not settling for the geographical reality of segregation and racial inequality, they pursued integration and justice in order to create a new geography, a beloved community in which former oppressors and victims could be neighbors. But in order to accomplish this he had to prophetically see his oppressors as neighbors before it was a physical reality. His mental category for "neighbor" had to include the oppressor.

My mental category for "neighbor" has to include the oppressor too. This challenges me to the core because if I'm not careful, I can easily spend all of my time with people of color and/or socially-conscious people who are actively fighting injustice. And social psychology research reveals that our mental categories are significantly informed by our experiences. Since neighbors are the people with whom I spend time, I can easily acquire a category for “neighbor” that excludes people that "just don't get it." My mental geography reflects my physical geography; the more I spend meaningful time with people, the more I mentally categorize them as neighbors.

Consequently, non-justice-oriented people (who I'm less inclined to spend time with) are not part of my “us.” In other words, I don’t see them as neighbors. I don’t naturally extend *agape* toward them. I may resist external physical violence toward them (because I’m so awesome), but I don’t naturally feel the need to resist internal spiritual violence toward them. I can label, dismiss, and even harbor resentment toward them without feeling all that guilty. But MLK doesn't let me off the hook! His words challenge me to vigilantly evaluate and re-arrange my physical geography, so that my mental geography can prophetically see oppressors as neighbors, even before they live into that reality.

**3.**

*The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history.*

The cross challenges me to keep reconciling no matter the cost; the resurrection empowers me to keep hoping no matter the physical reality; the Holy Spirit reminds me that I'm simply participating in a process that was set in motion long ago and that I'm not actually in charge. Amen!

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