

## EXTREME LOVE

*"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordinances which the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it; that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your children and your children's children, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life; and that your days may be prolonged. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers and mothers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

(Deuteronomy 6:1-9, adapted RSV)

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, we should remind ourselves that one of our finest outreach programs, Adventures in Learning, was inspired by Dr. King. After Dr. King's assassination in 1968, our church began looking for a positive way to respond. Dr. Jerry Parker, our pastor at the time, asked Maggie Grundman to visit the Spinney Hill neighborhood off of Community Drive to ask what we could do to help. The request was for an after school tutorial program to help disadvantaged children. In 1969 Maggie agreed to get the program off the ground for six weeks and then hand it over to someone else. Well this has been the longest six weeks in history because it is 2002 and she is still directing Adventures in Learning! We thank Maggie for her many years of service and lives she's changed for the better.

As any Dear Abby reader can attest, our world is full of advice. Some sound, some not so sound and some outright contradictory. The advice out there is plentiful, but for every word, there is a counterword, for every message, a mixed message. For every cultural tidbit that urges daring, we find a balancing word of caution. "Throw caution to the wind," but "look before you leap." "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," but "we shouldn't rock the boat." We're told to "speak our minds," but "if we can't say something nice, we shouldn't say anything at all." While we're encouraged to achieve, we're warned against being extreme.

On September 11 we were attacked by extremists, terrorists who were willing to pursue a suicide mission in order to inflict extreme suffering. Historically, most of the people that we as a nation have despised have been extremists in one form or another: right-wing militias, the Ku Klux Klan, the old Nazi party of Hitler's Germany or the current brand of Neo-Nazis. And yet extremists also win our adoration. Pick any hero you can think of and what makes her or him great is some sort of extreme characteristic:

Albert Einstein-extreme intelligence, Eleanor Roosevelt-extreme compassion, Michael Jordan-extreme athletic ability, Mother Teresa-extreme mercy.

Presidents' Day is approaching, and when we think of George Washington who helped found our nation or Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves and helped maintain the Union, we realize we are honoring extremists: Presidents who pursued their dreams for our country with extreme dedication and strength.

Through the years, our nation has benefited from the passionate leadership of other extremists including Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who had this to say back in 1963 about being labeled an extremist: "I was initially disappointed in being so categorized. But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction...Was not Jesus an extremist in love? [When he said☉] 'Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.' Was not [the prophet] Amos an extremist for justice? [When he said☉] 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream'...Was not [the Reformer] Martin Luther an extremist? [When he said☉] 'Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God'...So the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love?" (*Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, April 16, 1963).

The scripture passage we heard earlier from the book of Deuteronomy is a call to extremism—a call to extreme love. In this passage, the Hebrew people are urged to prioritize their love for God above everything else. In a day when most people were polytheists, this call to monotheism was radical. And though we've gotten used to the idea by now, the call remains just as radical today. For when we worship God alone, we choose to worship God over a success-driven culture, which all too frequently forgets the least of these, our needy sisters and brothers.

The passage from Deuteronomy says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In other words, we should love God with our whole being, with our whole lives. In the New Testament, Jesus referred to these words as "the greatest commandment." He then built upon the idea, saying that "The second commandment is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The call to Christian discipleship is a call to radical love, the kind of love that goes beyond our feelings, and seeps into our actions.

Where pity may lead only to our feeling sorry for someone, extreme love compels us to become involved. Typically in life or death situations, we as a nation rally and try to help. Be it the September 11 attack or the latest hurricane, we shift our prayers and our resources to provide comfort and healing.

But as extremists for love, we must remind ourselves that lesser-publicized tragedies happen every day: that every day 24,000 people die from hunger and diseases related to malnutrition, that in Nassau County, the homeless rate has doubled in the past 6

months, that we all know adults who struggle with depression, or teenagers threatened by eating disorders.

These are grim statistics, and they can weigh us down. But they don't have to. When we celebrate MLK and his legacy—the boycotts, the sit-ins, the Poor People's Campaign, and the freedom gained, we celebrate the fact that we have the power to change our world.

Adventures in Learning demonstrates the power we as a church have as we have helped literally hundreds of children lead more healthy and productive lives.

We all have this power. We all have something to contribute. We can all work together to change our world, one small step at a time. Does it matter if we bring our clothes to the collection barrels downstairs? Ask the homeless man with the warm winter coat. Does it matter if we teach our children about God? Ask the child who has found comfort in her faith. Does it matter if we bring dinner to a grieving family? Ask the mother who fed her children with your meal.

Our choices matter. We all have the power to use our lives for love. In life's larger issues, and in the most mundane daily task, love always matters, love always nourishes our lives and our world. And now may we all, like Dr. King, live our lives as extremists for love. AMEN.

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday  
January 20, 2002  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love, God of justice, God of peace, we gather today as your people in the midst of confusing and troubled times. You know the burdens of our hearts, how we weep for those who lost loved ones to violence, how we hurt for those families whose lives have been shattered by cruelty, and how we want so desperately to make the world a more safe, just, and peaceful place for all people. Comfort those who are suffering. Give them hope, strength, and courage to face the weeks and months ahead.

We pray for our distressed world. For those who are being oppressed or exploited, we ask freedom. For those who are experiencing prejudice or discrimination, we ask equality. For those who lack adequate food or housing, we ask that their needs might be met. Call us from complacency to action that together we might transform every corner of this world into a more just and loving place.

We thank you this day for dreamers and prophets who have lived and died to help others. Today we especially thank you for the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. May his legacy of social action, nonviolent living, boundless compassion, and deep faith encourage us in our daily lives. Through Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace we pray.  
AMEN.