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Love is the power behind nonviolence

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

When his house was bombed, Martin Luther King rushed home from his church on Dexter Avenue in Montgomery, Ala. He'd been preaching and leading a meeting in support of nonviolence.

Miraculously his family hadn't been hurt. Yet who knew what would happen next? Was this the first of a series of attacks? Would the next hour bring a mob rampaging through the streets? Frightened and angry, a crowd grew in the front yard.

Dr. King stepped onto his front porch and addressed the mass of men willing to defend him and his family.

No one would have blamed him for resorting to armed protection. Instead, he urged restraint. He told the crowd to go home and put away their weapons. Those whom he asked to stay the night to watchfully protect his home were told not to have any guns. In the face of violence, King stuck firmly to his message of nonviolent response and relied on the superior power of love to ultimately defeat hatred.

King preached and practiced the biblical concept of "love your enemies." It was more than conviction in the Scriptures or blind faith in the Word of God. King had moved beyond a doctrinal platform to a living faith and comprehension of God as Love. As he said later, "Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love."

It's this absolute conviction of the power of love that makes King so appealing to me. The founder of this newspaper, Mary Baker Eddy, once

wrote: "I make strong demands on love, call for active witnesses to prove it, and noble sacrifices and grand achievements as its results.... Love cannot be a mere abstraction, or goodness without activity and power" ("Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896," page 250). Whether or not King was aware of her words, certainly he put this message into practice in ways that blessed hundreds of thousands of people.

I know how frightening guns and tear gas can be. I was in high school and college during the campus uprisings in the United States. My mother, who was attending graduate school at the time, narrowly escaped being taken hostage. The professor told them to turn out the lights as armed students rushed through the building. In the dark, Mother prayed. Suddenly the door burst open. A gun-wielding man in his 20s swung his rifle around the room as his eyes adjusted to the dark.

Mom said later she prayed for everyone's safety and to know that God governed. The professor suddenly stepped into the light spilling from the hallway and calmly told the intruder that his graduate students had important oral exams to complete. The man hesitated, and then turned and left. The class continued. The campus closed for several weeks, as others had been taken hostage.

On several occasions, heavily armed National Guardsmen arrived at sporting events or concerts I attended. Once my friends and I were detained by a guardsman armed with a machine gun. In each case my only resort was prayer. I was afraid. Students had been killed only a few hundred miles away. I would pray mightily that the God of love would love us and keep us all safe. We quietly extracted ourselves from each circumstance without incident.

These experiences caused me to respect in a profound way the tremendous moral courage and spiritual conviction of African-Americans during the '50s and '60s. And even more to realize the elements of divinity that Martin Luther King expressed in his daily walk and life. He practiced Jesus' teaching as a powerful force in the modern world. As he said in 1957, "I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world.... love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in

the universe. Someone must have sense enough and religion enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love.”

Today Jesus' message as practiced by Martin Luther King is just as needed as ever. There is hatred in the world. Armed groups are taking power through violence and the threat of violence. Fear, prejudice, injustice, and slavery still exist. Expressing divine Love is the only way to permanently remove these evils. As we celebrate Martin Luther King's life, let's rekindle a conviction in the power of love to reverse hatred and restore justice.