Martin Luther King wrote his first book, Stride Toward Freedom, in 1958. He visited cities promoting the book and was met by enthusiastic crowds. “When he visited a department store in Harlem, however, the welcome was not as cordial. Black nationalists, unimpressed by King’s strategy of ‘love thy neighbor,’ shouted insults. Other blacks yelled at him because King was going into a bookstore owned by whites. Once inside, King began autographing copies of his book. One woman made her way forward, eager to meet the visiting author… ‘Are you Mr. King?’, she asked. Receiving an affirmative nod, the deranged woman suddenly reached inside her dress and pulled out a letter opener… and thrust it deep inside King’s chest… King was rushed to Harlem Hospital with the letter opener still in his chest… ‘He’s lucky to be alive at all,’ doctors admitted. ‘The tip of the weapon had penetrated to the aorta. Just one sneeze or cough and he’d have been gone.’” P. 163 (Not Only Dreamers, David R. Collins, Brethren Press)

Following a long recovery, the doctors ordered King to slow his pace. “With that in mind, he and Coretta set off for India, homeland of his hero—Gandhi.” P. 164 (Not Only Dreamers, David R. Collins, Brethren Press)

King first encountered the writings of Gandhi while a student at Morehouse College. Benjamin Mays, the principal, had made a pilgrimage to India to study Gandhi’s teachings. King later studied Gandhi while at Crozer Theological Seminary. I am proud that the man who taught King his social ethics, Kenneth “Snuffy” Smith, also was my professor of social ethics.

Upon his return from India, King wrote, “As I read the works of Gandhi I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. The whole Gandhian concept of satyagraha 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 that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

King continued, “A few months ago I had the privilege of traveling to India. The trip had a great impact on me personally and left me even more convinced of the power of nonviolence. It was a marvelous thing to see the amazing results of a nonviolent struggle. India won her independence, but without violence on the part of Indians.”
King said, “I do not want to give the impression that nonviolence will work miracles overnight. People are not easily moved from their mental ruts or purged of their prejudiced… feelings. When the underprivileged demand freedom, the privileged first react with bitterness and resistance. Even when the demands are couched in nonviolent terms, the initial response is the same. I am sure that many of our white brothers in Montgomery and across the South are still bitter toward Negro leaders, even though these leaders have sought to follow a way of love and nonviolence. So the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up the resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.” From, “How My Mind Was changed,” Christian Century, April 27, 1960

King continued, “It was the Sermon on the Mount that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to… social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love. As the days unfolded, however, the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi began to exert its influence… About a week after the protest started, a white woman who sympathized with the Negroes’ efforts wrote a letter to the editor comparing the bus protest with the Gandhian movement in India. Miss Juliette Morgan, sensitive and frail, did not long survive the condemnation of her white community, but long after she died the name of Mahatma Gandhi was well known in Montgomery. People who had never heard of the little brown saint of India were now saying his name with an air of familiarity. Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating idea. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.

King wrote, “…the use of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral. To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love.” From Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 66-71

King once paraphrased the words of Gandhi: (Stride toward freedom) “We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children; send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities and drag us out on some wayside road, beating us and leaving us half dead, and we will still love you. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”

It is remarkable that “Mahatma Gandhi never had more than 100 persons absolutely committed to his philosophy. But with this small group of devoted followers, he galvanized the whole of India, and through a magnificent feat of nonviolence challenged the might of the British Empire and won freedom for his people.”
Many scholars believe that Jesus himself may not have had 100 true followers during his ministry, persons who understood and practiced his teachings. Yet, consider the impact of his life.

Gandhi once wrote that “Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. (His) was nonviolence par excel lance.” Gandhi learned much from Jesus that made him a better Hindu. He learned to see a “Christic presence” among the poor and untouchables and helped to bring that class of people into fuller acceptance as Hindus.

Gandhi said, “…because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded I believe that He belongs not solely to Christianity but to the entire world; to all races and people…” (28)

Jesus, Gandhi and King each launched a revolution based on love and nonviolence. And they each changed the shape of history. “Violence begets violence,” is the teaching of all three prophets. King and Gandhi both stood on Jesus’ moral shoulders.

Jesus essentially eliminated the category of enemy. It was these teachings that deeply impacted King and Gandhi, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you… If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?… You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also…” (Mt. 5:38f)

What Jesus began in the first century, we were blessed in the 20th century to have peacemakers like Gandhi and King who were also nonviolent resisters. They were each a potent Love Force in the world who practiced nonviolence.

It was beyond tragic when, a few years ago, the violent nature of American society broke into the pacifist world of the Old Order Amish in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Charles Carl Roberts IV targeted young Amish girls, killing, wounding and traumatizing them for no direct reason other than their vulnerability. Not long after the tragedy, an Amish neighbor dropped by the Robert’s home. A pastor who was visiting the family of the attacker said, “The Amish neighbor wrapped his arms around Charlie’s dad for an hour, telling him, ‘We will forgive you.’”

Islam and Christianity appear locked in global confrontation. How sad it has been to read of churches being burned by Muslims in Pakistan and mosques and churches targeted in warring Nigeria and Iraq. Two world religions, deeply committed to peace, practiced by nations committed to war and/or terrorism. Nuclear weapons are falling into the hands of the most unstable governments with little power to stop its expansion.
What can you and I do to make our world less violent? What can we do to stop the killing of innocent young children in drive-way shootings in our city? What can we do to make guns less available? What can we do to stop the way violence is celebrated in video games and in television shows, in cartoons for children, and in action movies? What can we do to become less violent in our homes, with our spouses and partners, with our children? Can we forgive those who have hurt us, rather than retaliate? What can we do to approach terrorists with the power of love rather than bombs? What can we do about the number of homicides in our city? What can we do to reduce stereotypes of Muslims? What can we do to help Kansas City become a City of Peace?

On one of my mission trips to Tijuana, standing at the border, looking across to California, with the rust-colored wall that has just been erected, nothing but big and ugly, a true symbol of our violent policy, the anger of the Mexican people is obvious by the graffiti scrawled on the wall:
“This joke is a wall.”
“Lesson in how to lose friends and alien-ate neighbors.”
“Welcome to Fortress America.”
“Feel safe yet?”
“How’s the view, San Diego?”

Mexico is not our enemy, and neither are most of those of Mexican descent living in America. Safeguards and restrictions are necessary but the current vitriolic attitude toward law-abiding immigrants and the violent way we treat those who have yet to become citizens is immoral and wrong. It is contrary to Jesus’ teaching: “Welcome the stranger.” It is contrary to Jesus’ way of nonviolence.

One day a man got out of his Toyota Prius after it had stalled on 75th Street. A Democrat drove by and failed to stop and help. A Republican drove by and failed to stop and help. A Christian pastor did the same. But the next car stopped and offered the man a ride to get his car repaired. He was an undocumented Mexican immigrant. It’s the story in which Jesus asked, “Now who is this man’s true neighbor?”

When World War 2 was ending, and Britain was preparing to end its colonial rule in India, Muslim politicians demanded that India be divided along religious lines. Brutal riots and massacres broke out between Muslims and Hindus. Gandhi journeyed to Noakhali, where 2.5 million Muslims lived in isolation and absolute poverty. Though he was largely unknown to them, at 78 years of age, he walked on foot to 49 of their villages. Within weeks, the entire region was disarmed and at peace. “He walked unarmed as a pilgrim of peace into a chaotic war zone, an apostle of nonviolence in a land possessed by violence.” (Mahatma Gandhi, Apostle of Nonviolence, by John Dear, SJ)

We would do well to remember these teachers of nonviolence, Jesus, Gandhi and King, as we practice nonviolence in our lives, with our children and grandchildren, with our neighbors, with immigrants, in this city, in our nation and around our world. Amen.