The relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus is a curious one. In some ways they seem to be in competition with each other. For instance, there’s a story in Acts where Paul comes across some of John’s disciples in Ephesus who are still out there “preparing the way of the Lord.” Paul explains to them that Jesus was the one John was talking about, so they all become baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. That story is sort of an aside in the tales of Paul but it might point out that not everyone was in agreement over whose movement, John’s or Jesus’, should be followed.

The Gospels all make it clear that Jesus is superior to John. John says as much when he refers to the one coming after him. So it seems a little odd that John sends his people to ask Jesus this question. What is it he’s hearing that makes him question Jesus? I’ve read some interpreters who think that John may be wondering why he’s in prison if Jesus is really the One. He may be questioning the whole thing when he thinks about how miserable his condition is; perhaps he’s wondering if he made the right choice after all.

That’s one way of reading it. But I’m inclined to think there may be something else going on here. John was not a naïve person. He knew why he was in jail. He said things that were offensive to an insecure king, which Herod was; he was always having his legitimacy questioned. And John was sort of disrespecting the temple authorities by calling folks away from Jerusalem into the wilderness. It was as if he were telling them the system was too corrupt to help them. His baptism events in the Jordan were a kind of protest theater aimed at the religious leaders of the day. It was no surprise that he was in jail.

It could be John wondered why Jesus was not in jail. John’s expectations were a bit more radical than what he was hearing about Jesus. Earlier in the gospel we hear John tell the crowd the One coming after him will have “his winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John’s hope was for a revolution, a complete reversal of society that would pave the way for God’s arrival.

His vision was closer to Mary’s who sings of that reversal, of God bringing the mighty down and lifting up the lowly. There is a strong revolutionary element in the gospels. Mary, young as she likely was, understood that things could not go on as they were. The poor could not be ignored forever. They would be filled with good things, their hunger relieved, while the rich would be sent away empty. It’s hard to imagine how that could be accomplished without some kind of armed uprising, some kind of violent revolution.

I think that’s what John expected from Jesus. So when he hears about Jesus preaching and healing, he must be wondering where the army is supposed to come from. Why isn’t Jesus preparing for the struggle? Why isn’t he training his followers to confront the Roman army?
Where is the winnowing fork that would clear the threshing floor and send the chaff to burn forever?

It’s so tempting to think that way about our enemies. It’s tempting to imagine that we can overcome violence with violence. Who can blame John for wanting Jesus to bring down an army of angels and destroy the Romans and everyone who cooperated with them. To us it feels like that’s the only way to defeat oppression or tyranny. Yet I’m not aware of anyplace in the world where that’s been done and resulted in anything lasting or good. Even our own revolution which seems to have come close, didn’t really result in the kind of freedom the founders talked about. Slavery continued and grew for another ninety years and the native population has been occupied and mistreated right up to this day. Once violence is our answer to injustice where does it stop? How do we find peace again once we’ve given in to violence?

The amazing thing about Jesus’ movement was his refusal to give in to violence. In a reflection titled “A Gift of Love,” Dr. Martin Luther King describes young black men from Chicago who had once run with gangs being convinced to give nonviolent protest a chance to bring about change in their communities. He writes, “All their lives, boys like this have known life as a madhouse of violence and degradation. Some have never experienced a meaningful family life. Some have police records. Some dropped out of the incredibly bad slum schools, then were deprived of honorable work, then took to the streets….No wonder it appears logical to strike out, resorting to violence against oppression.” These kids were taken to Mississippi to march with others during the summer and face down authorities who were willing to sic dogs on them, fire tear gas at them; citizens on the streets throwing bottles and bricks at them. But they didn’t flinch. They protected others with their bodies and refused to retaliate. King writes, “I saw boys leap into the air to catch with their bare hands the bricks and bottles that were sailed toward us.” These young men learned the power of nonviolence to bring real change.

Jesus brought the power of nonviolence to bear through preaching good news, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind. And in doing that with the poor and rejected of society he brought sight, healing and good news to the powerful as well. We discover in his ministry of love that true transformation can happen even in the hardest of hearts. This is an insight Martin Luther King also insisted on. In various essays and sermons he stressed that justice for the oppressed would ultimately redeem the oppressor as well. Jesus’ movement was about restorative justice, not retaliation or punishment. We don’t see many examples of that in our world. One that comes closest, I think, can be found in South Africa after the fall of Apartheid. Rather than simply striking back against the oppressive white power structure, a series of reconciliation commissions were held so those victimized could speak about their experiences to their oppressors directly to make room for healing to occur. Most people in the world predicted a bloodbath would occur in South Africa after Apartheid was dismantled. Instead, through a process of reconciliation a mostly peaceful transition was accomplished.

Where John saw the chaff sent to burn and the wheat gathered in, Jesus saw the possibility of wholeness for all through good news and healing. I wonder if his answer to John’s messengers was satisfying. For all his marvelous traits, he may not have been able to accept Jesus’ ministry after all. Perhaps that’s what Jesus means when he says, “Truly I tell you, among
those born of women no has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Jesus opens the door to the kingdom of heaven through his preaching and healing, restoring wholeness and sight. Those who walk through discover a depth of love unimaginable to someone with violent expectations. When we embrace the way of Jesus, we embrace the power of nonviolence to redeem the lost and change the world. We enter the kingdom of heaven and are made new by the power of love. The Baptist in us must decrease so the Christ in us may increase. As King once said, And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind’s problems. And I’m going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn’t popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I’m not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I’m talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate. I’ve seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I’ve seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.

Amen