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Love your enemies: Beginning a reflection on the Sermon on the Mount

John Dear | Jun. 26, 2007 On the Road to Peace

The bad news is so overwhelming these days, it's hard to find any good news. But the Gospel provides it in abundance in the life and teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, his great manifesto of revolutionary nonviolence. Every June, we hear excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, in the daily readings. If I had any say, I would create a "Sermon on the Mount" Sunday and have the entire text read out loud at every Mass. In an effort to promote some good news, I thought I'd offer a kind of summer series on the Sermon on the Mount, as a way to stay focused on the nonviolent Jesus and his vision.

Mahatma Gandhi read from it twice a day for the last 40 years of his life -- and he was not even a Christian. He considered these texts the greatest writings on nonviolence in the history of the world. Since he wanted to become a person of nonviolence, he treated these teachings as a basic primer, as the catechism of nonviolence. I want to do the same.

I've already written about the Beatitudes, and thought I'd jump around and start with the centerpiece, the climactic highpoint, the sixth of six antitheses ("You have heard it said, but I say to you?."), the great commandment: "Love your enemies."

We can never talk about this commandment enough. For me, it sums up Christianity. If we do this, we will obey Jesus fully, because it encompasses everything -- reflecting God's universal love, working for disarmament, seeking justice for the poor, practicing forgiveness, living in hope and trusting in the God of peace. I've long considered it the most radical, political, revolutionary words ever uttered. And by and large, for the last thousand years at least, we've done our best to avoid them and disobey them.

Why? Because they go against everything every nation teaches. Perhaps because we are afraid; we don't believe God will protect us. The whole world is based on the commandment: hate your enemies, punish your enemies, kill your enemies. Jesus reverses the entire nation/state system. He invites us not to hate, punish or kill anyone, especially those targeted by our nation/state. Needless to say, this means, he would want us to love, not kill, the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Colombia, Haiti, Russia, and any other people the U.S. military has targeted.

The text uses the Greek word "agape." Unlike any word in the English language, "agape" calls for deliberate, unconditional, non-retaliatory, sacrificial, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, nonviolent universal love, a love which lays down our lives for others, in this case, the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. Jesus commands us to

practice the unconditional love of God, to show, for example, "agape" to the people of Iraq. He wants us to stop killing one another, stop waging war, stop building and maintaining nuclear weapons, and stop our country from killing people. It is not enough for us not to kill; we have to stop our country from killing others. He wants us to reach beyond our borders to embrace everyone as a sister and brother, to make sure they have the fullness of life and love, to live in peace with everyone.

Jesus was not preaching hopeless idealism. He advocated a wise strategy for living in peace. "Love for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world," Dr. King wrote. "Jesus is not an impractical idealist; he is the practical realist. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out." Nelson Mandela put it this way: "I have never yet met an enemy whom I did not try to turn into a friend."

I've never understood why Christians do not take this commandment seriously. We Catholics believe in transubstantiation, and never question that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. We eagerly obey the command, "Do this in memory of me." But love our enemies? When I raise this commandment, the general response I get is: "Are you nuts?" When will we believe in the transformation of enemies into friends?

What's so shocking is that Jesus commands us to love our enemies not just because it's right; not just because it's moral; and not because it's the only practical solution; but because God loves God's enemies. This is the nature of God. Jesus wants us to be "sons and daughters of your God in heaven, for God makes God's sun rise on the bad and on the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and on the unjust.

I don't understand how Jesuit and Catholic colleges maintain ROTC programs, for example, where students pledge to "destroy the enemies of the United States." For that matter, I don't see how anyone can claim to follow Jesus and be a member of the U.S. Army, Navy or Air Force.

But this is an old argument. St. Augustine wrote long ago that sometimes the best way to love your enemies is to kill them. I think St. Augustine was wrong. He dismisses the teachings of Jesus with one sentence, and was widely praised for his insight. His comment gave birth to the just war theory. But I say: You cannot love your enemies by preparing or threatening to kill them, much less actually killing them.

Jesus forbids killing. His universal love outlaws violence. He never justifies war. He oppose every military, every weapon, every intent to kill. So from now on, we oppose Bush's war on Iraq, the Pentagon's imperial military bases, and nuclear weapons at Los Alamos and Livermore Labs because we are sons and daughters of the God of peace. We are people who love our enemies.

This is precisely what my friends in Australia have been doing. The Pine Gap Four were recently found guilty of trespassing at the U.S. military base in the remote northern territories, but thankfully not sentenced to prison (see **www.pinegapontrial.blogspot.com** **[1]**). Others, including my friends Carole Powell of Brisbane and Simon Moyle of Melbourne, trespassed last week during the U.S. military exercises off the Northeast coast and face trial in August. (And by the way, my friend Jarrod McKenna of Perth turned me on to a great new book, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*" by Glen Stassen, that I highly recommend.)

Imagine if every priest and bishop spoke out with love for our enemies, like Daniel Berrigan? Imagine if every

Catholic traveled abroad to targeted places like Iraq and Iran to love our enemies, like Kathy Kelly? The question is: Dare we practice such love? How do we love our enemies? How do we stop our government from killing them? If we are to obey Jesus, we need to move this reflection from abstract theory to concrete action.

Once we start loving our enemies, government officials, soldiers and patriotic citizens will persecute us. That's a sign that we've begun to obey Jesus. That's why, I think, Jesus immediately follows this commandment with a second about prayer. We are told to pray, not for ourselves, not even for our enemies, but for our persecutors -- for those people who are mad at us for loving the people of Iraq, for those who harass us, punish us, even arrest us. And so, as Sermon on the Mount people, we try to love the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, and pray for those who oppose our universal love.

John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," (Doubleday) is available from

www.amazon.com [2]. His antiwar trial has been postponed until Sept. 6.
Next month, he will be on a speaking tour of England and Scotland. For information, see:

www.johndear.org [3].

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