

A Lenten exercise of nonviolence

John Dear | Feb. 25, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last week, at the annual "Faith Alive" retreat in Chicago, we gathered to ponder the Gospel of Jesus from the hermeneutic of nonviolence. And many there raised familiar questions:

- Why this violence toward myself?
- How to cope with my fears?
- How risk Jesus' nonviolent path when we've got families and jobs? Mortgaged homes and scarcely the time to exercise?
- And: Why bother anyhow? The church, with aggrandizement foremost on its mind, scarcely supports us?

Sincere questions, all of them, from an unusually conscientious group. Sixty parishioners from Chicago's North Shore came together in the early 1980s to build community and study scripture and theology. An extraordinary endeavor for middle-class Catholics. They've been meeting yearly now for 27 years. And they've affiliated themselves with one of liveliest peace-and-justice groups in the country, the North Suburban Peace Initiative (www.nspipeace.org), directed by Jack Kelly.

While many of their friends and relatives have bid the church a sour goodbye, these folks have hung in and struggled to understand their faith and spirituality. I suspect they're offering a model of what the church could become for more of us -- a kind of base community in every parish to nurture and deepen genuine faith. They struggle over the tough issues and, during our time together, their authentic questions flowed.

I brought them no panacea -- they'll resolve the perennial questions together, over time. I urged them, in the meantime, to stay with the questions. Don't shy from the inner work. Ask the questions in light of the Gospel of peace. What are you and I afraid of? How can one let go of fears and grow deeper in true faith, hope and love? What keeps you and me from taking a public stand on the thorny issues? How can we stay faithful to the Gospel work of justice and peace, whether we're effective or not?

I told the group, especially as a Lenten practice: Name the fears, share them with one another, pray over them, ask for the grace to trust God and walk forward in faith.

As they focused inwardly they asked one another pointed questions: What are we clutching and trying to defend? Why is violence still our first instinct? Does this nonviolence stuff work?

We are all acculturated to violence and war, I explained. To get beyond our impasse, we need to study -- to learn the methods of nonviolent resistance. We need to train ourselves to respond creatively and peaceably. We need to process this Sermon on the Mount way in our church groups and families.

But I also insisted that by no means are we bereft of a role model. I reminded them of the unarmed, vulnerable Jesus, who trudged from the desert to Galilee to Jerusalem, a stretch of land filled, on the one hand, with Roman

garrisons and outposts and, on the other, with stealthy, elusive Galilean brigands. The brigands were sworn to sabotage and ambush and assassinate and make midnight raids for Roman property. They were the scourge of the Romans and the Roman's Jewish collaborators.

Through such Galilean badlands, Jesus acted contrary to expectations: He offered compassion, healing and love. More, he spoke truth to the cruel and powerful in favor of the oppressed and poor. He demanded justice, and resisted the empire. Here, I submit, is our model. Jesus shows us how to live a non-defensive, fearless, loving life. I posed the question: why not take Jesus at his word? Why not take a closer look at his methodology of active peacemaking and universal love? And then try it on for size?

As the laments piled high about The Way Things Are, the most heart-felt laments arose from recognizing anew the violence in themselves, something that lingers in us all. We put ourselves down, wallow in self-hatred, find ourselves shackled to ego, envy, resentment, and the urge to throw elbows at others similarly inclined.

Recently, a friend and I were discussing how it took Thomas Merton, the great monk, 20 years in a Trappist monastery, before he began to deal seriously with his own inner violence. Look it up. On August 21, 1962, he wrote in his journal:

Today I realize with urgency the absolute seriousness of my need to study and practice nonviolence. Hitherto I have "liked" nonviolence as an idea. I have "approved" it, looked with benignity upon it, praised it even earnestly. But I have not practiced it fully. My thoughts and words retaliate. I condemn and resist adversaries when I think I am unjustly treated. I revile them, even treat them with open (but polite) contempt to their face. The energy wasted in contempt, criticism and resentment is thus diverted from its true function -- insistence on truth.

If such is the case with Merton, certainly with us. Our following the nonviolent Jesus requires the daily inner work of deepening nonviolence. And what a better time than Lent? It's a time to look deeply at what's going on inside us and, where we are violent, to repent and then to offer ourselves mercy. The more we show compassion toward ourselves, the more we will toward our neighbors.

Then as we make the social, economic, and political connections, then -- scandal of scandals! -- we can love our enemies. We can offer compassion to whatever enemy our nation foists upon us: Iraqis one day, Afghans the next. Brought low by draconian Western policies, the poor and the marginalized will have cause to rejoice. And we won't help but be able to see the link, as though forged in a foundry, between our personal spirituality and global justice.

But be forewarned. Such inner work is devilishly hard. It is the task of a lifetime, perhaps the core of the spiritual life -- to allow the light and love of God to flame within us, to non-cooperate with our own self-hatred, to "bear serenely the feeling of being displeasing to ourselves," to purloin the words of Therese of Lisieux.

We're a mess -- so is the church. But I suggested to the group, don't give up on Jesus. Indeed, now more than ever, we should return to his teachings and experiment with his message, his example. The outcome of such a project lies beyond our control. But that need not bother us. The attempt is the important thing. Therein lies faith.

One last insight offered to these good, sincere Catholics. The Gospels begin exactly where we are -- with Jesus grappling with inner temptations to exploitation and power. For 40 days he fasts and prays and fights doubts and despair. Tricks come to his mind. There's an easier way, the way of domination, of security, of honors -- a way void of trust in God, a path doomed to self-destructive violence.

As did Jesus, we must finally say no. We must, like him, stay centered and trust in God's love. And to our battered souls will come the ministering angels, soothing our violence toward ourselves, assuring us of God's

compassion, an overflowing compassion we can tender to others. Jesus' compassion reaches to astronomical heights -- to the improbable degree of offering forgiveness, as he sagged on a cross, to his murderers.

My hope and prayer is that this Lent all of us can dig deeper into the mystical depths of inner nonviolence. And then move on toward a more mature spirituality, one that emulates the way of Jesus -- the way of the cross as nonviolent resistance to evil and injustice, and from there into the new life of resurrection peace.

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St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, *John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work* by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, *A Persistent Peace* (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from www.amazon.com. On April 24-26, he will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center in Stroudsburg, Pa.; see: www.kirkrdige.org. For info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org.

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