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The Great Rebuke

John Dear | Aug. 4, 2009 On the Road to Peace

It astonishes me to read in the Gospel of Luke how Jesus instructs his disciples to love their enemies, be compassionate, welcome children, serve the poor, feed the hungry, and take up the cross -- and how the disciples just don?t get it. Instead, they ask if they can take up the sword. Two thousand years later, we still don?t get it.

In chapter nine, we?re told how Jesus practices what he preaches by walking toward Jerusalem to confront the empire, and he goes there by walking along the Samaritan border, the hated enemy territory. Jesus loves everyone, and wants to meet them. But in one detail, we learn that a Samaritan village would not welcome Jesus because he was heading toward Jerusalem. When James and John hear this, they ask Jesus, ?Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them??(Luke 9:54).

How could they even make such a request? Have they misunderstood everything the nonviolent Jesus has taught them? Apparently. Jesus has patiently tried to teach them the wisdom and way of loving nonviolence, and yet they still want to kill the enemy. They prefer the teachings of the mighty prophet Elijah, who called down fire from heaven and killed his enemies.

?Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village,? Luke states (9:55). We?re offered the image of a gentle shepherd walking ahead of the flock. They can?t keep up with him. He?s like a nonviolent hero leading the troops. The key here is that he turns around and rebukes James and John. He does not let the possibility of violence, vengeance, or retaliation linger for a moment. He will not tolerate it. Jesus practices tough love, and sets a new boundary for us, the boundary of nonviolence. We are free not to kill.

That rebuke was on my mind this weekend as we went to Los Alamos to pray, vigil and sit in sackcloth and ashes to commemorate the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the continued maintenance of thousands of weapons of mass destruction. We have surpassed James and John, the would-be fighter bomber apostles. We can call down fire from heaven whenever we want, and we have, and we continue to do so today. It?s not ?pagans? unleashing this fire from heaven. It?s Christians and Catholics. It?s those of us who claim to follow the nonviolent Jesus.

If Jesus turned around and rebuked James and John, what would he say to us?

I think we need to hear that great rebuke of Jesus. Nuclear weapons are not the will of the nonviolent Jesus, and it?s time to get that through our heads. If we listen, we can hear his voice coming from all sides, from the grassroots movements to church people to the world?s poor and bombed. It?s a clear rebuke in the face of our warmaking.

The disciples never really learned the lesson. At the last supper, when Jesus offers them his body and blood, calls them to serve, and speaks of the end times and the need to flee like the people in exile, they respond, ?Lord, look, here are two swords!? At last, they think, we can use violence for a righteous cause! ?Oh forget it,? Jesus says in effect. (22:38)

A few hours later, when Judas and the soldiers come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemani, the disciples ask, ?Lord, shall we strike with a sword?? (22:49)

One would think that after three years, nearly a thousand days of retreat on loving nonviolence, they would know not to ask such a question, that such a question would no longer enter one?s mind. But violence runs deep in them?and in us.

?Stop, no more of this!? Jesus says in the Garden of Gethsemani. ?Put down your sword,? he tells Peter says in John?s version. He rebukes every attempt by the disciples to use violence. Become like little children, love one another as I have loved you, have faith, trust God and forgive, he instructs them. The peace I leave you is not of this world, he says.

We are blessed to know the outcome of the story -- how Jesus? practices perfect nonviolence even as he faces execution, how he rises from the dead, offers his gift of peace and invites us to continue his campaign of disarming nonviolence.

Yet after two thousand years, we still ask, ?Lord, shall we strike with a sword? Can?t we build and drop nuclear weapons? Don?t you want us to fly our unmanned drone bombers over Pakistan and Afghanistan? Can?t we please call down hellfire from heaven??

At Los Alamos, where we build the core pit of every nuclear bomb, production is down to six pits per year. But that?s at a price of $2.2 billion annually. That money, to put it mildly, would be better spent elsewhere.

?We are at the crossroads of a nuclear free world,? Nobel laureate Jody Williams told us on Friday night at the Santa Fe Convention Center. ?It will happen if we all get involved and work for it.? She told stories from her Vermont childhood, how she and her classmates had to hide under their school desks to be prepared in case a nuclear bomb was dropped on her school. But those days of hiding and accepting the possibility of nuclear war are over, she said. We all have to stand up and speak out for nuclear disarmament.

Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire called us to be people of nonviolence, to take Jesus seriously and obey his teachings of universal love and peace. She spoke of the late Fr. George Zabelka, one of the chaplains for the Enola Gay, who blessed the men as they flew off to drop the bomb on Hiroshima, and told them, on their return, ?Congratulations on a job well done!? Years later, he went to Hiroshima, learned about the suffering caused by nuclear bombs, and converted to Gospel nonviolence. He heard the rebuke of Jesus, and spent the remainder of his life repenting and teaching the lessons of peace.

?The American people need to say they are sorry to the people of Japan for dropping atomic bombs on them,? Mairead told us. ?If you do not say you?re sorry, then you end up repeating your violence... Violence is a preventable disease. We need to teach each other nonviolence.?

On Saturday, August 1st, nearly three hundred of us lined Trinity Drive in Los Alamos, and sat down in sackcloth and ashes for thirty minutes of silent prayer in the hot sun. We were repenting of our complicity with the culture of war and the mortal sin of nuclear weapons and begging the God of peace for a miracle of nuclear disarmament. We are trying to hear that rebuke of Jesus, and to respond appropriately.

At the closing rally by Ashley Pond, Mairead and Jody called us once again to seize the moment in this critical year and push the U.S. government to get rid of nuclear weapons. Right letters, make calls, contact the media, organize events, do what you can, they said.

?As citizens, we don?t just have rights,? Jody says. ?We have responsibilities. Change happens not because you

want it to happen, but because you make it happen.?

In these hot August days, as we remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ponder the horrific violence of our world, my hope and prayer is that church people everywhere can hear anew the loving rebuke of Jesus, take it to heart, and follow him where he wants to lead us--into greener pastures of peace, the new life of nonviolence.

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John Dear?s latest books, A Persistent Peace (Loyola Press) and Put Down Your Sword, (Eerdmans), are available from www.amazon.com.. St. Anthony Messenger?s Press has just published John Dear On Peace, by Patricia Normile. For information on his books and speaking schedule, or to invite him to speak at your church or school, see: www.johndear.org.

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A message from John Dear about his*NCR* columns

Dear Friends,

Thank you very much for reading and supporting my weekly column. Each week about 2,500 people read these columns. We would like to double that by the end of the year. Would you please send this e-mail to 10 friends and ask them to sign up?

Any other outreach you can give to promote this column would be greatly appreciated. Here's a direct link to the e-mail sign up.

Thanks, too, for all you do for justice, disarmament and peace, for teaching and practicing Gospel nonviolence.

God bless you,
Fr. John Dear, SJ

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