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Essay: Peace is Every Step

John Dear | Oct. 12, 2008

If peace is a journey, there are steps to be taken, a path to keep to. For years, I've pondered this path and my own missteps. I tend to take two steps forward and many more backward. To get back on track, I've reflected on the path as it was trod by Jesus, by the saints, and today by peacemaking friends. I'm guided too by our ancestors, the first Christians, who called themselves "People of the Way." Too bad that phrase after about the third century fell out of favor. It nicely sums up the essence of the matter. Christians are people of the way of peace. And no matter where on the journey we are, each of us must peer ahead for milestones. By now, having plodded the path for some 25 years, I know of a few such milestones, places to gain assurance that we're still on the path.

The prayer of peace

The first is prayer. One begins by turning quietly inward, there to meet God, the author of peace. And there, as well, to survey our violent proclivities -- our anger, resentment, hurts and hatreds. In sincere prayer we confess them to God and let them all go. And to all who ever hurt us, we grant wide clemency and prodigally offer forgiveness. Here already is a large step. We move from anger to compassion, from vengeance to peace.

Over and over we plumb the mystical depths of peace in prayer and soon our very presence becomes disarming. Change overtakes us; we settle into peace with ourselves. And we soon regard our identities afresh -- as daughters and sons of the God of peace. The political peace we seek will radiate from our very beings.

So the first step of each day is to take time in intimate relationship with the God of peace. We permit God to love us and disarm our hearts. As we do, we become instruments of God's peace and join God's peace movement in a world of war.

Interpersonal peacemaking

The next move is toward our neighbor, our spouses, children, parents, friends, those we encounter at the store and the restaurant. Every day is a chance to practice nonviolence, tender a healing word and offer the peace of Christ. Every encounter of our lives becomes an experiment with loving nonviolence.

Public peacemaking

But the peace of Christ urges us further. It impels us as creative peacemakers now into the world of war, greed and violence. Because we know we are God's beloved sons and daughters, we do what we can. We find ways to hasten the end of war and to dismantle weapons. To eliminate poverty and create justice. To reverse global warming and protect creation.

We can shoulder tasks consistent with our temperaments and gifts and thereby lend momentum to the global grass-roots struggle. We join a local peace group. Organize around an issue of justice. March for peace. Hold vigil against the Iraq war. Fast and pray for peace or engage in civil disobedience against nuclear weapons.

As greed expands, wars abound and imperial violence spreads, all of us need to nudge the peace movement along. Every one of us has something to offer. Every one of us is needed. Every one of us, like Rosa Parks, can make a difference. So we take a step into the public realm, into the streets, where the action is, and lend our lives to the nonviolent campaign for peace.

Teaching peace

In a culture of war, the ordinariness of violence hangs in the air. Few institutions speak a contrary word -- everyone assumes the virtues of violence. War is justified, they teach. Nuclear weapons protect us, violence saves. God's very self is violent. This, to me, is nonsense. More, it's heresy.

The contrary word must come from Christians and other peacemakers. We must take up a contrary curriculum and become students of peace. We need to study the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day, along with the nonviolent social

movements of history. Then, we need to teach peace and nonviolence -- to our families and friends, our priests and neighbors, our congregations and workplaces. No one else will teach the wisdom of nonviolence. We must teach each other -- and the world. It's up to us.

Prophetic peacemaking

We are, I believe, called a step further. Not only to teach peace but to proclaim it against those powers that resist it tooth and nail. As did Gandhi and Dr. King and Dorothy Day, each of them prophets of peace, each of them now and then flinging fiery words toward the apparatus of war.

The times require that we break through the silence. They require our public denouncing of every ideology and institution that scuttles justice, harmony and peace.

Being prophetic will put our churches and peace groups in choppy waters, as we proclaim in season and out an unpopular truth: "In the name of the God of peace, stop the war and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Bring our troops home now. Let the United Nations resolve the crisis. Make massive reparations to Iraq. Don't bomb Iran. Seek nonviolent, non-military solutions for peace. Abolish the death penalty, torture, poverty and nuclear weapons. Feed every starving child and refugee on the planet. Make food, housing, health care, education, work and dignity a basic human right for everyone. Reverse global warming and protect creation."

Unpopular or not, the Gospel message must become a daily litany. It needs to be broadcast far and wide. As God urged Ezekiel, whether the rulers listen or not our job is to proclaim peace.

Visionary peacemaking

Alas, the culture of war has envisioned a future for us -- a world of perpetual war. If you've read the fine print, you know that the Pentagon and its servants propose a hundred years of war with Iraq. It has plans and contingency plans, all of them aimed at securing discounted access to the world's natural resources. And the centerpiece of the plan: a permanent nuclear arsenal, and for the poor, hunger, disease and death.

Vision is one of the first casualties of violence. One soon cannot imagine a world without it. A world without war, poverty and nuclear weapons? Who can conceive of it? Some have, and we must too, like the abolitionists. Slavery was rooted and profitable and all but a foregone conclusion. But along they came, these abolitionists, bearing an astonishing new vision -- a world without slavery. It was something they could envision, put words to, enflesh with hard toil. We can too. We can cultivate a contrary vision of a world without war, poverty and

nuclear weapons. So we call ourselves new abolitionists.

It falls on us, then, to be this generation's peacemaking visionaries and thereby to help each other back from the brink of violence. We do this by reimagining our lives and our church and by imagining a world at gentle peace with itself. With a new vision held aloft, we can generate hope for a new world, and inspire one another to walk toward it, work for it, make the vision come true.

A peacemaking church

Jesus blessed peacemakers, resisted injustice, and loved everyone. And along the way he called a cadre of followers and formed them into a community of creative nonviolence. Such, early on, was the nature of the church. Not so much today. The church has largely forgotten its calling. One of our tasks today is to help our church reclaim its vocation. We can help the church return to its pristine role as a community of creative nonviolence, a peacemaking community.

So we need to teach our priests and parishioners about the nonviolence of Jesus. To help us all be more nonviolent with one another, and to get more involved in the work of disarmament and justice, and to do so as church people. To form small base communities of prayer and action within our larger communities. Such steps grace the global institution. Over time they will undermine the church's outmoded just-war theory, lift up the astonishing ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, and help the church represent to the world the peacemaking Christ. Together, we can help the church be filled with people who love their nation's enemies.

Following Jesus

As we walk the path, we stay on track best by fixing our eyes on the nonviolent Jesus. Violence worsens every day, but we hold fast to the way of peace by focusing on the nonviolent Jesus. We read the Gospels daily, talk about Jesus morning, noon and night, and invoke his spirit at every opportunity. We try to do what he did, speak as he spoke, think as he thought. We try to love as he loved, serve as he served, pray as he prayed. To live as he lived and die as he died. With an unarmed sacred heart as wide as the world. With every gesture, a blessing of peace.

"I am the way," the nonviolent Jesus said. He is our reference point, our guidepost, our destination. He is the path. He is our peace, our one solid hope. With his example and light to guide us, we can boldly take the next step in peace. And with each step in peace, we know we have already arrived. From now on, we live in his realm of peace.

Jesuit Fr. John Dear just published his autobiography, A Persistent Peace *(Loyola Press).*

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About the artist

Artist Beth Vannatta, alias “Piglet,” is a retired art teacher living on a 48-acre farm in Halstead, Kan. In recent years she became so incensed at the casualties of war that she decided to do something about it. She made a series of antiwar sculptures and took them on the road.

“These sculptures hold great personal meaning for me,” she has written on her Web site. “Not so much like my children, but more as a part of my inner being; perhaps a piece of my soul. As the forms emerged, they seemed to gain a life of their own. I feel deep tenderness, empathy, and love for them. It is my hope they will kindle similar reactions in others.”

To make room for her artistic projects she converted a large chicken house into a studio where she does much of her sculpture.

Vannatta said she created the antiwar sculptures by three different methods: carved stone, forged and brazed copper, and cast bronze.

“Originally, I had decided I could not afford the expense of casting bronze. Surely I could come up with some way to achieve a comparable result. Forged, brazed copper was my solution. It is an intimate process. Cut, beat, bend, braze. Don’t like it? Add more metal. Still don’t like it? Cut it away. Add on -- take away. And, always it is hands on. I can work as steadily and as long as my strength will allow. Sleep, pick it up, and go again. Always, always the work is in my hands.”

She has shown her work in Kansas, Missouri and Colorado, and her work was carried in two Wichita, Kan., galleries.

Vannatta earned a bachelor’s degree in art education from Fort Hays State College in Hays, Kan., and has accumulated some 30 graduate hours, mostly from Wichita State University. She taught at Hutchinson High School in Kansas from 1969 to 1996, and also taught jewelry design part-time at Hutchinson Community College from 1987 to 1999.

She adopted and has raised five children and “numerous grandchildren.”

You can see a video about Vannatta’s antiwar sculpture on YouTube. Type in: piglet vannatta.

-- *NCR staff*

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