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This Lent, practice a spirituality of resistance

John Dear | Mar. 8, 2011 On the Road to Peace

Lent invites us to repent of our complicity in the culture of war and injustice, and to walk the way of the cross with the nonviolent Jesus to Jerusalem to resist the empire.

As we begin Lent, I thought I would share notes from my talk last week at the Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem. I had been asked to speak on ?a spirituality of resistance to empire? and offered ten starting points.

The topic raises good Lenten questions:

What is our spirituality of nonviolence and resistance? How do we challenge empire and war and remain faithful to the God of peace and justice? Where is God on our journey out of empire and war, on our journey of resistance to empire and war? Who is the God we meet as we stand up against our nation?s wars and point the way to peace? What spiritual practices and resources do we call on for our journey of nonviolence and resistance?

Here are my ten points. They are not meant to be definitive by any means, just suggestions to inspire Lenten reflection about your own spiritual journey as a peacemaker. A blessed Lent to all!

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A spirituality of resistance is a spirituality of nonviolence.

We do not challenge empire and the false spirituality of empire by the means of empire, but through active, creative, loving nonviolence. Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, ?Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil? (Mt. 5:39).

We need to deepen our nonviolence, cultivate interior nonviolence, reject passivity, non-cooperate with violence, practice meticulous interpersonal nonviolence, and join the global grassroots movements of nonviolence as they challenge empire and injustice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi insist that active nonviolence is a methodology that works to change the world.

A spirituality of resistance is based in the nonviolent resistance of Jesus and in discipleship to Jesus, the nonviolent resister of empire.

Gandhi said, ?Jesus was the most active nonviolent resister known to history.? Jesus? life and teachings show us how to resist war, injustice and empire. He proclaimed a vision of God?s realm of nonviolence, and then began a campaign into Jerusalem to confront the empire?s violence.

Even under arrest, torture and execution, Jesus practiced perfect nonviolence, loving and forgiving everyone while still insisting on the truth of God.

Before Pilate he explains it all: ?If my kingdom were of this world, my attendants would use violence and fight to protect me; but it is not of this world, so they do not use violence.?

Just as the crucifixion of Jesus was completely legal, the resurrection was totally illegal. The soldiers were sent to guard the tomb, and put the imperial seal on the tomb as if to say: ?We killed you, you?re dead, so stay dead.?

Once again, Jesus breaks the law. He engages in civil disobedience and his campaign of nonviolent resistance continues. Our spirituality is an active discipleship to Jesus the nonviolent resister.

A spirituality of nonviolent resistance reclaims the nonviolence of God and claims our core identity as God?s beloved sons and daughters.

The empire creates fear. Gandhi taught that a spirituality of resistance is based in ?fearlessness.? How do we live, not based in fear, but in nonviolent love?

I propose we center our lives in the unconditional love that the God of love and peace has for each one of us. God does not create empire or bless empire. God wants us to live as God?s beloved children in the fullness of life, love and peace.

Jesus learned this at his baptism when he heard a voice tell him: ?You are my beloved son.? He claimed that core identity until his death. We need to do the same.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that if we are the sons and daughters of God, we make peace and practice universal nonviolent love: ?Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called the sons and daughters of God.? (Mt. 5:9)

?You are the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace,? Jesus tells us, ?not the sons and daughters of the empire or the culture of war and violence.? In a spirituality of resistance, we claim this core identity and remain faithful to it, so we go forth, make peace, resist empire, live in God?s love and welcome God?s reign of peace.

?Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors,? he teaches, ?that you may be sons and daughters of the God who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad and the rain fall on the just and the unjust.?

God is a God of universal nonviolent love, and since you are the sons and daughters of the God of universal nonviolent love, you offer universal nonviolent love, which means you resist empire and love everyone. Our work for peace and justice is rooted in our fundamental identity as God?s beloved sons and daughters.

A spirituality of resistance requires a regular practice of contemplative peace and prayer.

As we resist war and injustice, we spend time every day with the God of peace in silent prayer, contemplation, meditation. We need to be with God, let God love us, let God heal us, let God lead us out of war and empire, and let God give us God?s gift of peace.

That means, we spend time with God, and there in that Spirit, let go of our inner imperial tendencies, our inner violence, anger, hatred, resentment, and desire for vengeance -- the roots of empire, war, and occupation within us and forgive those who hurt us and cultivate an inner peace.

In this spiritual practice, the God of peace disarms us and encourages us to be instruments of peace in a world of war.

A spirituality of resistance requires personal, mindful nonviolence toward ourselves and others.

As peacemakers we should live like little emperors running our own personal empires.

We have to non-cooperate with the empire?s occupation of our lives and souls, which means first, to non-cooperate with violence toward ourselves. We have to be sure to be nonviolent to ourselves.

The work of nonviolent resistance can easily trigger the lingering violence within us and reopen past wounds, and we need to be aware of that. We need to look deeply within, examine the roots of our violence, be gentle with ourselves, not beat ourselves up and cultivate interior nonviolence.

Remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advises us not to base our nonviolent resistance in anger. It will not sustain us for the long haul; it stirs the embers of violence. Besides, we do not want to spend our entire lives in anger.

Jesus advocates two specific emotions: grief and joy. We need to practice grief in solidarity with our grieving sisters and brothers. We also need to cultivate joy.

?Blessed are those persecuted for justice?.Rejoice and be glad.? Look at Archbishop Tutu. He is a man of grief and joy, and continues to change the world. He?s a good model.

As resisters, we have to be especially nonviolent toward everyone we meet every day for the rest of our lives. Contrary to the spirituality of empire and occupation, we love everyone as a sister and brother. We need to be attentive to our personal nonviolence, to be as loving and compassionate as we can.

To the extent that we can do this, the days of occupation and empire are not only numbered; a new world is being born.

From this spirit of nonviolent love, we can create communities of love and nonviolent resistance, care for each other and sustain each other, help create new churches of nonviolent resistance to empire, and widen our circle of friends into a global beloved community.

Our Palestinian sisters and brothers show us that a spirituality of resistance is a way of life. We need to relearn this, to make nonviolent resistance our daily practice for the rest of our lives.

Our spirituality of resistance has to be engaged. It is not passive, but praxis-oriented. It is about action.

To walk with Jesus on the path of nonviolent resistance, we have to engage in some public action for peace and justice. As Archbishop Romero said, no one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

There are a million things to do for justice and peace. Certainly, we can stand in greater solidarity with the world?s oppressed, disenfranchised peoples. I hope we can do something to advocate for the end of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. funding of Israel?s occupation of the Palestinians, and poverty, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction.

A spirituality of resistance is prophetic. Like Dr. King and Gandhi, we need to be people of prophetic nonviolent resistance. We need both a new prophetic theology and a prophetic spirituality.

That means we listen attentively to the voice of the God of peace, and then, we say publicly what the God of peace wants said. We speak the truth with love, we call one another out of empire, we call one another back to the God of peace, we point toward a new world of peace.

A spirituality of resistance breaks the silence, complicity and acceptance of war and empire. It denounces war and empire and announces justice and peace.

It stands up publicly and says:

?Come out of empire. Do not support empire. Do not work for empire. Resist empire. Help dismantle empire. End the occupation, end the blockade on Gaza, tear down the wall, welcome the Jewish vision of shalom; end the U.S. war on Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

?End all wars; close all 730 U.S. military bases around the world; and close Los Alamos nuclear weapons labs. Dismantle every nuclear weapon, stop the weapons trade and the corporate greed which robs and kills the poor and poisons the earth.

?Feed every starving child and person on the planet. House, heal and educate every person on the planet. Find alternative sources of energy and protect creation. Build new cultures of justice, inclusivity, nonviolence and peace, here and everywhere.?

This must be our message as prophetic peacemakers.

A spirituality of resistance means being visionaries of a new world of nonviolence.

We have to help one another imagine a new world of peace. We are so blind, we cannot see our way forward.

Part of our work of resistance is to reclaim the imagination for peace, to point to the reign of God as Jesus did. All the great movements for social change did this. They helped ordinary people imagine and see the coming of a new world.

By doing this, people were mobilized to make their vision come true. We need to do the same, to announce a new world without war, poverty, occupation, tear gas, rubber bullets, executions, racism, sexism, apartheid, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction.

A spirituality of resistance is a spirituality of the cross.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said we have to learn how to use suffering creatively.

Instead of killing others, we are willing to undergo being killed in the struggle for justice and peace; instead of inflicting violence on others, we accept suffering without even the desire to retaliate as we pursue justice with love for all people.

King said we will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to accept suffering, and we will wear you down because unearned suffering love is redemptive.

So we resist injustice and empire by walking the way of the cross. I think the best way to do this is to see our journey as accompanying Jesus as he carries the cross of nonviolent resistance today. We try to unite our suffering for justice and peace with his.

If we can be one with Jesus as he carries the cross in nonviolent resistance, and with the crucified peoples of the

world, then our suffering is transformed and we participate in God?s disarming, redemptive work, and the fall of empire is assured because the paschal mystery is the path to peace and justice.

A spirituality of resistance is a spirituality of hope and resurrection.

Don?t lose heart! Cultivate hope. Keep doing hopeful things. See our life work for justice and peace as preparation for resurrection. We are getting ready for resurrection!

How do we do this? Thomas Merton said we should not place our hope in results. Do the good because it?s good, Merton said. Place our hope not in results or success but in the God of peace. The outcome, remember, is in God?s hands.

Instead of worrying about results, we give our lives for justice and peace, we love everyone, resist empire, and place our lives and our work in God?s hands, which means we acknowledge that this is God?s work.

Beware the push for immediate results, for success. That is the language of empire, of the Pentagon; that is not our way.

We are servants of the God of peace, doing God?s will, letting God achieve the results, even as we give our lives in love for suffering humanity, for God?s reign of justice and peace. Our hope is in God. Instead, follow the alternative nonviolent image of Jesus: let your lives bear good fruit.

With the risen Jesus, there is reason for hope. Change is possible.

Mubarak fled Cairo. The U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and hunger, poverty and nuclear weapons can end. God is at work disarming and transforming the world, and we can join God?s peace movement.

In the process of seeing our work for peace and justice as God?s work, we deepen our spiritual roots and find the strength and hope to spend our lives in the struggle.

Then we become the people we were created to be: God?s holy peacemakers, God?s beloved sons and daughters. That is cause for great hope!

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