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What Jesus taught in the Garden of Gethsemane

John Dear | Mar. 13, 2012 On the Road to Peace

It's only in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Judas and the Roman soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus, that the early community -- the disciples of men and women, the first church -- finally come to understand Jesus. There they realize just how serious Jesus is about life-giving nonviolence. Lent invites us to come to the same realization, but unlike the disciples, to stay the course of nonviolence with Jesus, come what may.

Under the cover of night, in the first act of violence by a disciple, Judas kisses Jesus and betrays him, and the soldiers move in for the arrest. In the second act of violence by a disciple of Jesus, Peter himself takes out a sword, strikes at a soldier and cuts off his ear. Jesus will have none of it.

"Put back your sword, for those who take up the sword will surely perish by the sword." These are the last words of Jesus to the church before he was executed, and it's the first time they recognize the depth of his nonviolence. What do they do? They all run away.

Here's Matthew's version:

> While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people. His betrayer had arranged a sign with them, saying, "The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him." Immediately he went over to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and he kissed him. Jesus answered him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then stepping forward they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. And behold, one of those who accompanied Jesus put his hand to his sword, drew it, and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all those who take up the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to seize me? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me. But all of this has come to pass that the writings of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled. (Matthew 26: 47-56)

Lent invites us to walk with the nonviolent Jesus on the way of the cross. If we do our work and take time to reflect on Jesus' nonviolence and our discipleship to him, we will invariably notice the ways that we too reject his nonviolence and run away from him, just as the first disciples did. This self-examination is critically important. We need not panic because we feel this way. Instead, such thoughts offer an opportunity for prayer, growing in faith and learning to trust Jesus.

Each Lent, we walk with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, to the civil disobedience in the temple and arrest in the garden. This Lenten journey provides us the chance to take another step on that path of nonviolence. But that terrible moment in the Garden of Gethsemane raises particular questions: Where do we find ourselves in this scene? Do we side with the religious and imperial authorities in arresting and condemning this nonviolent revolutionary -- and present day nonviolent revolutionaries? No? Do we sympathize with Peter, who takes up

the sword to kill to defend Jesus? Yes? Do we believe with him that killing the soldiers would be justified, that this marks a true just war? How do we respond to Jesus' commandment, "Put down the sword"? Do we accept Jesus' nonviolence, or, when push comes to shove, do we too run away?

Jesus clearly forbids his disciples from the use violence to defend him or themselves against the soldiers. He intends to accept the consequences of his way of peace, love and nonviolence. He rules out violent retaliation, vengeance, killing and warfare.

In Luke's account, Jesus reprimands the disciples, saying, "Stop! No more of this!" (Luke 22:51) But Matthew's version offers a reason for this commandment of nonviolence: "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Other translations put it this way: "Those who take up the sword will surely perish by the sword." With this teaching, Jesus addresses the world's downward cycle of violence and calls us to end it. Violence begets violence, Jesus says, so have nothing to do with violence. Break the cycle of violence with your creative nonviolence. If every Christian obeyed this teaching, violence would rapidly disappear.

Two thousand years after Gethsemane, however, we still disobey Jesus and participate in the downward spiral of violence. We bomb Afghanistan, execute people, build nuclear weapons, fund warfare around the globe, steal the resources of the world's poor, destroy the earth and threaten Iran to prevent the country from developing nuclear weapons. Our war talk over Iran is particularly hypocritical, given our own massive nuclear arsenal. Although others may continue to believe the myth of violence in response to violence, we Christians are commanded to put down the sword, stop the violence and hear the truth that those who live by the sword die by the sword.

The nonviolent Jesus does not want us to live or die by swords anymore. He wants us to beat our swords into plowshares, feed the hungry, study war no more and love our enemies. Up until his last breath, he heralds the coming of a new world of nonviolence. Dare we support his vision?

I'm beginning to think that sooner or later, every one of us walks away from the nonviolent Jesus. His way goes against everything we have been taught. It sounds naïve, foolhardy and downright scary. It means, like Jesus, we could get killed.

But Jesus has a long-haul view that few grasp. He speaks about trusting in the God of peace and fulfilling the Scriptures. He knows that God is trustworthy, that he will live on, and that we too are all headed toward resurrection peace. So he teaches us how to live, love, pray, serve and die -- not how to kill. He accepts the reality of death, but determines that he will not go to his death by inflicting violence. He never takes up the sword. I don't think he had a drop of violence in his being.

This verse from Matthew is worth our reflection. It proposes a new law of nature. It suggests that if we are violent -- personally, nationally and globally -- eventually that violence will come back upon us. Does Jesus teach that those who wage war will die by war? Those who bomb people will suffer and die by bombs? Those who use drones to terrorize other nations will one day be terrorized by drones? Those who threaten others and use nuclear weapons on others will one day be threatened and subjected to nuclear weapons? This is the logic of Matthew's Gospel, and the history of violence and war bears it out.

Certainly, Jesus could have taken up the sword, but he doesn't. Indeed, he announces that he could call upon 24,000 angels to appear right at that moment in the Garden of Gethsemane to protect him from the soldiers, like some fantasy scene out of *The Lord of the Rings*. Those soldiers would probably have died of fright! But Jesus does not want to scare anyone or rely on superhuman strength. He remains human, nonviolent and peaceful -- and suffers the consequences of his nonviolent humanity. He is willing to die nonviolently and trusts he will rise in peace. And he offers this example for us.

Peter was probably angry that Jesus wouldn't take up the sword in violent self-defense. John's Gospel names Peter as the one who strikes the servant and cuts off his ear. He simply can't grasp Jesus' cosmic strategy of nonviolence. He sees only passivity.

Why don't we listen to Jesus and obey his teaching about violence? Like Peter, I suppose we don't know any other way, and we can't believe that Jesus could be right. In the end, we want to live and die by the sword. We can't imagine life or death without our swords -- or guns, or bombs, or drones, or nukes. We are stuck in the rut of violence, blind to the illusions of its false security, clueless about the never-ending downward spiral that leads to death and ignorant about the power and wisdom of nonviolence.

Nonetheless, the Gospel insists: Do not live by the sword -- personally, nationally or globally. The sword has become a metaphor for every weapon of war, and Jesus' bottom line rule remains. No disciple is permitted to take up a gun, to build or drop bombs, or to use any instrument of violence. Live a nonviolent life. Learn the things that make for peace. Love your enemies. Be ready to welcome the resurrection gift of peace.

In the midst of these tough teachings, I hear a quiet word of hope. Yes, those who live by the sword, in the grand scheme of things, will die by the sword. But the opposite is also true: Those who live in love will die in love. Those who live in peace will die in peace. Those who live in compassion will die in compassion. Those who live by mercy will die in mercy. Those who live in nonviolence will die in nonviolence.

More, if we dare obey Jesus, refuse to take up the sword and train ourselves to live like him in a spirit of peace, love and nonviolence -- then we will have no need to run away from him! We will not be scared or angry or worried or doubtful. We will want to remain with our nonviolent Good Shepherd.

If we can live our lives, like Jesus, in his spirit of love, peace and nonviolence, we will go to our deaths in that spirit and share in Jesus' eternal life of love and peace. We will be true to our humanity and fulfill the biblical vision of peace. And we will also stand at the side of the nonviolent Jesus. That is the greatest blessing of all.

Lent invites us to learn Jesus' way of nonviolence, to train ourselves and be ready so when push comes to shove, we do not take up the sword, but remain peaceful, nonviolent, faithful, so that we can be instruments of peace. As more and more of us accept Jesus' nonviolence and spread his teaching, we can help end the death penalty, this evil war in Afghanistan, the nuclear nightmare and the plague of violence that threatens us all.

We need not participate in the senseless game of violence anymore. We can see how the cycle of violence fails time and again. As followers of the nonviolent Jesus, we have a better way. May Lent be a time to deepen our discipleship to that Holy Way of nonviolence.

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John Dear will speak March 14 in Atlanta; March 16 in Nashville, Tenn.; and March 17 in Knoxville, Tenn. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [3] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[4]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[5]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[6]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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