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The Eucharist's new covenant of nonviolence

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

As we approach Holy Week, it's helpful to ponder the passion, arrest and death of the nonviolent Jesus, in light of our own tumultuous times and personal journeys. This week, I'll reflect on his Eucharistic offering; next week, his betrayal; and the following week, his death. In light of his teachings of peace, love and compassion, the Last Supper is certainly rich and hopeful, yet profoundly sad and mysterious. That whole week is filled with drama, tension and danger as the authorities stand on the lookout to arrest and kill Jesus.

Just days before, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey using street theater to fulfill Zechariah's vision of a nonviolent messiah who comes to abolish war and establish a permanent reign of peace (see Zechariah 9:9-10). Then he engaged in civil disobedience in the temple, enraged the authorities, and drew the crowd's rapt attention with his teaching. The whole city was aroused by his public activity.

So when he instructs Peter and John to prepare for the Passover meal, the strange details make sense. "Go into the city, and there you will see a man carrying a water jar," he tells them. "Follow him, and he will take you to a house where you can prepare the Passover meal." (see Luke 22:13) We know something unusual is underfoot because in those days, of course, men never carried water jars! Only women did that. Here we get a clue about Jesus' underground movement. Perhaps one of his benefactors had secretly offered to provide the upper room in a kind of "safe house," and arranged this sign so the disciples could prepare the meal. The authorities would not notice and Jesus would not be arrested. Indeed, Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus did not want to be arrested or killed, and would have left the city after the Passover. His plan might have worked -- except for Judas, who turned him in.

The Synoptic Gospels describe the moment in the upper room. Here's how it begins in Luke's version:

"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I shall not eat it again until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, gave thanks and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves, for I tell you that from this time on, I shall not drink until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you. Do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which will be shed for you." (Luke 22:14-21)

When he offers the bread as his body and the cup as his blood, Jesus becomes the Passover meal. As others have written, he fulfills humanity's exodus out of slavery, symbolically demonstrates what will happen the next day on Calvary, memorializes his own life and witness, and invites us to participate in that Paschal Mystery by partaking of his very body and blood.

But as I ponder these words and gifts within the context of our world of permanent war, the Eucharist takes on another level of meaning. There in the upper room, Jesus reaches the epitome of creative nonviolence. He starts a new covenant "in my blood, which will be shed for you."

Of course, any mention of a covenant in the Bible is critically important. Here, to my way of thinking, Jesus invents "a new covenant of nonviolence." He will not hurt others or kill others for us, but he is willing to suffer and die for everyone, and wants us to do likewise. He wants us all to join his underground movement of transforming nonviolence, his campaign of resistance to injustice, war and empire. He calls us to give our bodies, our blood, our hearts, our very lives for one another, for suffering humanity, for the reign of God.

When Jesus invites us into his new covenant of nonviolence at the Last Supper, he throws away the old covenant of violence. With this historic, salvific breakthrough, he frees us from the old rules, laws and ways of violence, war and empire. He dismisses the ancient fundamentalism that once sanctified violence. He does away with every justification of violence. From now on, in his new covenant of nonviolence, we live by a new set of boundaries, based on peace, love, forgiveness and compassion, and so we dwell in Christ's peace.

At the Last Supper, with this new covenant, Jesus sets humanity on a new path toward peace. The days of violence and killing are formally declared over.

Perhaps we don't often think of the Eucharist in light of Gandhi's hermeneutic of nonviolence. I think that's because we're still stuck in the old covenant of violence. Few live this new covenant, or teach it, or preach it, yet it remains at the center of our faith, at the heart of our weekly worship.

There are so many things Jesus could have said and done. For instance, he could have said, "Break their bodies for me! Shed their blood for me!" That's the kind of violent messiah Peter and the others were hoping for. That's the logic of the old covenant of violence, the logic of the Roman empire, the U.S. military and every nation/state throughout history.

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But Jesus turns that logic upside down and offers a new covenant of nonviolence, saying: "This is my body broken for you! This is my blood shed for you!" And he follows this profound gift of sacrificial nonviolence with a commandment: "Do this!" In other words, "Do the same with your bodies and blood. Don't break the bodies of others; don't shed the blood of others in war. Give your lives nonviolently for

others, as I have done for you. This is the best way to remember me."

In this new covenant of nonviolence, we prefer, with Jesus and the martyrs who followed him, to shed our own blood for others, rather than shed the blood of others. We prefer to accept suffering rather than inflict suffering on others as we struggle for justice and peace. We prefer to die rather than to kill. This is the dynamic which Jesus sets in motion at the Passover meal.

Theoretically, at every Eucharist we join his nonviolent campaign and enter his Paschal Mystery for strength to pursue his vision of a world where no more bodies will be broken and no more blood will be shed. And we pledge to give our lives nonviolently for humanity until that vision comes true.

In this way, as the church teaches, Jesus uses the bread and the cup to reconcile everyone with one another and with God. Through our sharing in his body and blood, and therefore, theoretically, through our sharing in his active nonviolence, we become the body and blood of Christ. We "remember" him and join his work to disarm and heal the human family.

Today, however, many of us participate in the Eucharist, in his new covenant of nonviolence, yet still cling to the old covenant of violence. We want the Eucharist, but not his new covenant of nonviolence. We might believe in transubstantiation -- but we're not about to give our lives for peace or join the paschal way of creative nonviolence.

This gets to the heart of our problems. Do we really want Jesus, his gift, his way, or not?

One way to describe our culture of violence, war and empire is to call it "anti-eucharistic." War is the ultimate anti-Eucharist. It destroys the bodies of our enemies, sheds the blood of our enemies, divides us all, severs any efforts at reconciliation and kills the body of Christ.

When we partake of Jesus' Eucharist, we take a public stand against the culture of war, violence and empire, and its anti-eucharist. But it's one or the other. We can't have it both ways. We can't celebrate the Eucharist of Christ's peace and still support the culture's ongoing anti-Eucharist of war and destruction.

This Eucharist of nonviolence summons us to renounce the old covenant of violence, accept Jesus' new covenant of nonviolence, and persistently reconcile with every living human being as sister and brother. The body and blood of Christ disarms us, heals us and gives us a peace not of this world. Bound by this new covenant of nonviolence, we are sent forth as peacemakers into the world of permanent war to give our lives in the struggle for justice in his memory. As keepers of the covenant of nonviolence, we espouse a consistent ethic of life, and resist war, executions, nuclear weapons, greed, environmental destruction and violence in all its forms. We no longer partake of the anti-Eucharist of war. We celebrate the Eucharist of peace.

As Holy Thursday approaches, I invite us to consider and accept Jesus' new covenant of nonviolence once again, and make it the framework for the rest of our lives.

John Dear will speak March 22 in Cleveland; March 23 in Toledo, Ohio; March 24 in Stegner, Ill., near Chicago; March 25 in Traverse City, Mich.; March 26 in Kalamazoo, Mich.; March 28 in Tulsa, Okla.; and March 29 in St. Louis. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, 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. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other

recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings; Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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