

“Together In Peace”

Rev. David Gregory

May 13, 2018

Seventh Sunday of Easter



First Reading

from Mahatma Gandhi

in a 1925 speech to the London Missionary Society of India

My nationalism embraces all creatures, all nations of the world. And, if I am able to fire India with the spirit of non-violence it can show a miracle to the world also. I don't want India to rise from the ashes of other nations. I want India to gain soul-force and make other nations strong. Other nations are not teaching us the way of strength. And that is what has compelled me to take my stand on that eternal principle and declare that I am never going to accept a constitution based on brute force.

President Wilson submitted his 14 points, but at the end, as a climax or an anti-climax, he thundered, "If we don't succeed in making the world accept them, of course, there is the sword with us."

I want to reverse his threat and say: "All our earthly weapons have failed. Let us find out some new one or we die." Let us now take up the weapon of love—of truth. When we acquire that weapon, we shall require no other.

Scripture reading

Matthew 5:0, 38-44

New Revised Standard Bible

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. But whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well. And if anyone sues you in a court of law and takes away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who would borrow from you do not turn away.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

We are completing our Seven Sundays of Easter, or an exploration of our essentials, the things that make us who we are. What are the core values and practices that make us who we are as individuals and who are we as a community of Spirit? This does not conclude this conversation, but hopefully after these seven weeks we'll be more complete in our understanding of our purpose and vision. Those who have been participating in Stone Soup on Thursday afternoons have often heard me ask "Are we complete?" I never mean "Are we finished?" but rather "Are we complete for now?" There are always times to revisit the things we are talking about. This has not been an academic exercise in which the preacher gives you something interesting to think about and sends you on your way. This is a soul-searching that extends to every corner of this community whether we are physically within these walls or not.

Together we have found that our core is compassion. At the very root of who we are—individually and collectively—is our ability to "suffer alongside," to see another person's pain, to feel it, and then to act upon that feeling. It's the ethical requirement that we treat all others the way we wish to be treated. It's not always the easy thing to do, but it is always right. Our compassion is nourished by the deeper streams of spiritual practice. Our unwavering commitment to contemplative life means that our activism in matters of human social justice isn't fueled just by anger, which easily burns out. It is this infinitely-Sourced well of Spirit to which we return daily through meditation and contemplative prayer which energizes us in ways that are independent of our age or physical capacity. We are infinitely loved, and so we love in return. Because we love, we act. And love, when it is fully active, wins. The extension of all of this is that we are a people of PEACE. This compassion and love we keep talking about, if we continue to practice it, to feed it, and most of all to live it, will mean that our interactions with the world around us will be radically non-violent.

A half century ago, in May of 1968, when the ministry of CCC was just beginning to take off in a big way, we were a nation in turmoil. It was about five weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King, and five weeks before the assassination of the leading candidate for President, Bobby Kennedy, which would be followed by a violent war in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention. Our cities were literally on fire that summer. A lineage of non-violent social change espoused by Gandhi and practiced by Martin Luther King had given way to something more vicious, more violent. People had had enough. Patience was wearing thin. The idealism that prevailed earlier in the decade was gone. Turning the other cheek was out of the question. Going the extra mile was over. Giving away your cloak was a thing of the past. And yet the words of Gandhi lived on. "When we acquire the weapon of love we shall require no other." And as for our Christian roots, we are left with the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount where we are told to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and to give away more of our clothing than we are asked for. It sounds like Jesus taught us to be passive and docile in acquiescing in the face of injustice and violence. Or did he?

In Stone Soup the other day Carol Saysette reminded us of the cultural context of these words, not always noticeable with a cursory reading. In a book entitled *Kingdom Ethics*, Glen Stassen and David Gushee explain it this way:

Turning the other cheek has been misunderstood in Western culture that thought there were only two alternatives—violence or passivity. But since Gandhi and King, we can appreciate Jesus’ teaching better. In Jesus’ culture, “to be struck on the right cheek was to be given a hostile, back-handed insult” with the back of the right hand. In that culture, it was forbidden to touch or strike anyone with the left hand; the left hand was for dirty things (Stassen, Just Peacemaking, 64-65, 68-69). To turn the other cheek was to surprise the insulter, saying, nonviolently, “you are treating me as an unequal, but I need to be treated as an equal.” Jesus is saying: if you are slapped on the cheek of inferiority, turn the cheek of equal dignity (138-139).

And by the way, Stassen and Gushee also point out that “do not resist an evil person” (or “evildoer,” in other translations) could also be (and should be) translated: “by evil means.” So, the full line could (should!) read: “But I say to you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means.” You see, it is actually a good idea to resist an evil person; Jesus did it all the time. The phrase “King of the Jews” was itself an affront to the dominance of Rome. Jesus resisted his own countrymen when they were in collusion with that power. He stormed into the temple and in a rage threw over the tables of the money changers. The Western image of the blond-haired, blue-eyed, quiet, passive Jesus is not at all faithful to the little that we actually know about this person.

The point of all of this is that when we say we are people of peace, we are not saying that we are passive. It does not mean that we do not care what is going on in the world around us. It does not mean that we acquiesce to the powers that be and pray for a new day when just leaders will show up and usher in a new era of peace and safety. We have to do more than pray for peace. We have to *become* the peace we seek. We need to model compassion toward ourselves, and toward each other. A community of faith and Spirit, like the one we inhabit here together, is really just a workshop where we try it all out. You see, if we can renovate an entryway and still love each other, we can become a model for how the world should be.

If we can pool our resources and help someone who is hungry or thirsty, or if we can provide sanctuary for those whose families or personal dignity are in peril, then we can say we are part of a peaceful resistance. If we can take the love and compassion we have for each other within these walls and practice it all the way down Rock Hill and out into our community, we can prove what loving, peaceful, active resistance really is. If we acquire the weapons of love, we shall require no other.

Let us find peace in our souls; let us practice that peace with one another. Let us actively, stubbornly live that peace wherever we go.

Amen.

