

CONSCIENTIOUS NONVIOLENCE

A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
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Jesus is called a number of different names in this passage from the Gospel of John:¹ "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world;" "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain;" "Son of God;" "Rabbi" or Teacher; "Messiah" or Anointed."

The New Testament depiction of Jesus is indebted as well to the imagery from Isaiah that we hear on Christmas, like Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace², and imagery that we heard in the reading today like suffering "servant" and "light to the nations."³

Here in the first chapter of John, Jesus is depicted as attracting others to walk with him as disciples, Andrew and Peter among them. Today's service commemorates one of the greatest modern disciples of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr. From the earliest followers of Jesus to those of us who try to walk in his footsteps today, people have been attracted to different names or identities of Jesus which move them in a unique way. For Martin Luther King, Jr. one of those names was the Prince of Peace⁴, who preached in the Sermon on the Mount "Blessed are the peacemakers;"⁵ "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;"⁶ "Love your enemies."⁷ Today I'd like to speak with you about King's profound commitment to nonviolence, a perspective I call conscientious nonviolence.

Back on September 30 of last year, before United States military forces began bombing in Afghanistan, I preached a sermon called "Blessed are the Peacemakers," in which I compared Christian just war theory with Christian pacifism. My colleague, the Rev. Jim Burklo, long active here as part of Stanford Associated Religions, has been organizing discussions on campus since last September in which he encourages students to develop what he calls conscientious perspectives on our war on terrorism. One conscientious perspective, Jim suggests, is a carefully developed just war approach, in which it is proper for the United States to use force to defend itself against attack as long as certain criteria like last resort, proportionality, and protection of civilians are met. Another conscientious perspective is a carefully developed pacifism, which calls upon the United States to cease all military operations -- not to be passive, which would be unconscionable, but instead actively to employ nonviolent methods to defend against future attacks and bring the September 11 perpetrators to justice. In the pacifism section of my September sermon, I talked about the role for international police work and national and international courts. I also described an audacious proposal of which I'd heard: organizing a peace march bringing five to six thousand people from Pakistan into the heart of Afghanistan, transporting and delivering massive amounts of clothing, food and medical supplies. Economic methods to combat terrorism should also have been included, like freezing bank accounts and interrupting international money networks that finance terrorists.

Today, in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., I'd like to explore how his pacifism, his conscientious nonviolence, might help us today as we struggle in the aftermath of September 11. To do that most fairly and most effectively, though, I want to speak exclusively in his words, not mine, using his interpretation of worldly realities, not mine, even though I'm also a pacifist. Remember, this is a man, who when he spoke had had his home bombed twice, had been stabbed in a near-fatal assassination attempt, had been jailed many times, and was reviled and hated by many.⁸ Of course, I'm the editor, since I've pieced together words of his from seven different sermons, speeches, and articles, choosing and ordering his words as I think might be most helpful for us now. Other editors might create another impression. At least, though, you'll hear what this student of King finds most compelling as I look for guidance from him! . Also, since we always run the risk of listening to a limited repertoire -- primarily his "I Have a Dream" speech -- around this time of the national holiday in his honor each year, perhaps something here will sound fresh and new. And so, I move into Dr. King's words, albeit without the benefit of his voice:

"How is the struggle against the forces of injustice to be waged? There are two possible answers. One is resort to the all too prevalent method of physical violence and corroding hatred. The danger of this method is its futility. Violence solves no social problems; it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Through the vistas of time a voice still cries to every potential Peter, 'Put up your sword!' The shores of history are white with the bleached bones of nations and communities that failed to follow this command."⁹

It is "a marvelous thing to see the amazing results of a nonviolent struggle. India won her independence, but without violence on the part of Indians. The aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign is found nowhere in India. Today a mutual fellowship based on complete equality exists between the Indian and British people within the commonwealth..."¹⁰

"There are many people who very honestly raise the question of self-defense. This must be placed in perspective... The line between defensive violence and aggressive or retaliatory violence is a fine line indeed... [V]iolence, even in self-defense, creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us to a community where men can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls."¹¹

How about war serving "as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force? ...[T]he potential destructiveness of modern weapons of war totally rules out the possibility of war ever serving again as a negative good. If we assume that mankind has a right to survive then we must find an alternative to war and destruction... The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."¹²

"Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of

bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos..."¹³

"[T]he first principle in the movement [of nonviolent resistance] is the idea that means must be as pure as the end. This movement is based on the philosophy that ends and means must cohere. Now this has been one of the longest struggles in history, the whole idea of means and ends. Great philosophers have grappled with it, and sometimes they have emerged with the idea, from Machiavelli on down, that the end justifies the means... [T]he idea of nonviolent resistance...is the philosophy which says that the means must be as pure as the end, that in the long run of history, immoral destructive means cannot bring about moral and constructive ends."¹⁴

"It's one of the strangest things that all the great military geniuses of the world have talked about peace. The conquerors of old who came killing in pursuit of peace, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon, were akin in seeking a peaceful world order. If you will read Mein Kampf closely enough, you will discover that Hitler contended that everything he did in Germany was for peace. And the leaders of the world today talk eloquently about peace. Every time we drop our bombs... [the] President... talks eloquently about peace. What is the problem? They are talking about peace as a distant goal, as an end we seek, but one day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal.

We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. All of this is saying that, in the final analysis, means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means, and ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends.

"Now let me say that the next thing we must be concerned about if we are to have peace on earth and good will toward men is the nonviolent affirmation of the sacredness of all human life. Every man is somebody because he is a child of God. And so when we say 'Thou shalt not kill,' we're really saying that human life is too sacred to be taken on the battlefields of the world... Man is more than a tiny vagary of whirling electrons... Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such...[W]hen we truly believe in the sacredness of human personality, we won't exploit people, we won't trample over people with iron feet of oppression, we won't kill anybody."¹⁵

"Man has the capacity to be good, man has the capacity to be evil. And so the nonviolent resister never lets this idea go, that there is something within human nature that can respond to goodness. So that a Jesus of Nazareth or a Mohandas Gandhi, can appeal to human beings and appeal to that element of goodness within them, and a Hitler can appeal to the element of evil within them. But we must never forget that there is something within human nature that can respond to goodness, that man is not totally depraved; to put it in theological terms, the image of God is never totally gone."¹⁶

[Yet, nonviolence] is not a method for cowards; it does resist. The nonviolent resister is just as strongly opposed to the evil against which he protests as is the person who uses violence... This method...is nonaggressive physically, but dynamically aggressive spiritually.¹⁷

A second point is that nonviolent resistance does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent... A third characteristic of this method is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who are caught in those forces.¹⁸

[Part of this means that] "We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values... A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of

many of our past and present policies... A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." ...A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just...' A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men... When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

'Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.'¹⁹

In speaking of love at this point, we are not referring to some sentimental emotion. It would be nonsense to urge men ([and women] to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense. 'Love' in this connection means...understanding redeeming good will for all men...It is the love of God working in the lives of men [and women]... We love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed he does.

Finally, the method of nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. It is this deep faith in the future that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of Easter drums."²⁰

"There comes a time when one must take the position that it is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but one must do it because conscience tells him it is right... [T]here is a need for all people of good will to come with a massive act of conscience and say in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'We ain't goin' study war no more.' This is the challenge facing modern man."²¹ AMEN.

¹ John 1: 29-41.

² Isaiah 9: 6.

³ Isaiah 49: 6.

⁴ See, for example, King's Christmas sermon on Peace at the Ebenezer Baptist Church on December 24, 1967.

⁵ Matthew 5: 9.

⁶ Matthew 5: 39.

⁷ Matthew 5: 44.

⁸ "Suffering and Faith," Christian Century (as collected in James M. Washington, ed., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), p. 41.

⁹ "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," Christian Century, 1957 (As collected in Washington, Testament p. 7).

¹⁰ "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Christian Century, 1960 (Collected in Washington, Testament, p. 39).

¹¹ "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," 1961 (As collected in Washington, Testament, pp. 56-58).

¹² "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 1960 (As collected in Washington, Testament, p. 39).

¹³ "The Most Durable Power," a sermon delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, on November 6, 1956 (As collected in Washington, Testament, p. 10).

¹⁴ "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience," (As collected in Washington, Testament, p. 45).

¹⁵ "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, December 14, 1967 (As collected in Washington, Testament, p. 255).

¹⁶ "Love, Law and Civil Disobedience (As collected in Washington, Testament, p. 48).

¹⁷ "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," Christian Century (as collected in Washington, Testament, p. 7).

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ "A Time to Break Silence," a sermon at the Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967 (As collected in Washington, Testament, pp. 240-242).

²⁰ "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," Christian Century (As collected in Washington, Testament, pp. 7-9).

²¹ "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," a sermon at the National Cathedral (Episcopal), Washington, D.C., March 31, 1968 (As collected in Washington, Testament, pp. 276-277).