

Practicing Peace  
A sermon preached by Dean Francis  
February 19, 2017

### **Matthew 5:38-48**

<sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

If you asked a hundred people on the streets of Evanston or Chicago to name a central message of the Christian faith, I’m guessing that many people could quote a portion of this morning’s gospel lesson to you. “Turn the other cheek.” We know that this was a central message of Jesus to his followers and we know that the early church resolutely placed the nonviolence of Jesus at the center of the church and of individual discipleship.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early church formed its identity around the belief that to be a disciple of Jesus, meant to be comprehensively nonviolent. For nearly 300 years after Jesus, Christians refused conscription in the Roman military. And the Church prepared its members to face the consequences for following the nonviolent Jesus, persecution and martyrdom. It nourished a culture of spiritually-grounded nonviolence through works of mercy, through the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation, and through resistance to the culture of violence.

Not a single Christian writing exists before the early fourth century supporting Christian

participation in warfare. We know there were a few Christian soldiers during this time because Tertullian, in 197, rebuked Christians who were in the army. When he wrote that Jesus' command to love one's enemies was the "principal precept" of Christianity, the pagan author Celsus in the second century, condemned Christianity on the grounds that if everyone became Christian, there would be no army. Nonviolence was the hallmark of the early Church.

This steadfast conviction and faithfulness was founded in a clear grasp of Jesus's nonviolence. In contrast to the principalities and powers of the Roman state, the church's goal was to emulate Jesus' peaceful ministry. Time and again they retold the important stories that defined this messiah who was the beloved son of God and who proclaimed, in the Sermon on the Mount, that all peacemakers are sons and daughters of God; who in the desert rejected the temptation of violence and violent power, including the temptation to become a violent messiah; and who called his followers to love their enemies, to forgive, to be compassionate, and to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil.

In a countryside littered with broken and bloodied bodies, Jesus instituted a new covenant that broke bread and poured wine in place of the Roman use of violence to control their occupied territories or the Jewish rites of sacrifice that filled the pockets of the chief priests. When Peter, his most loyal and flawed follower, drew his sword against a Roman guard, Jesus told him to put down his sword. At his arrest, trial, condemnation, torture, and execution there is no record that he or any of his followers resisted with violence. Even during his resurrection appearances there was no revenge or retaliation toward those who had betrayed him. The early Church, in its spiritual formation, evangelization, sacramental life, and prophetic witness sought to faithfully live these facets of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Most of this changed after the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 C.E. As far back as Plato, the Romans had absurdly promoted the idea that military violence promoted peace. *Si vis pacem, para bellum* was their motto: “If you seek peace, prepare for war.” So Constantine turned the Christian faith on its head when he baptized his troops and established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Masses of people flocked into the church, which until then had been a small, grassroots network of underground communities of nonviolence. Constantine announced that Christians could now serve in the Roman military and kill Rome’s enemies. In doing so, he dispensed with the Sermon on the Mount and the commandment to love one’s enemies, and turned to the pagan Cicero to justify Christian violence, sowing the seeds for the so-called “Just War theory.”

By the early fifth century, only Christians could serve in the Roman army. St. Augustine then wrote that sometimes the best way to love one’s enemies is to kill them. Christians began killing others in direct violation of Jesus’ teachings and life, and this dependence on killing and violence is a deep-seated part of our world today.

Throughout the centuries since Constantine, the majority of Christians have joined the Roman cult of violence and convinced ourselves that our wars, our violence, our diminishment of humanity was in some way justified because of special circumstances or unique threats. For hundreds of years, we have consistently been in a state of self-delusion, convincing ourselves that the threat of others justified our inhumanity toward them.

In his commentary on this passage, Eric Paul writes, “God’s grace not only teaches us to say no to ungodliness but moves us toward the hard practices of reconciling with our enemies. Too often, we allow our humanness to keep us from growing into the nature and likeness of

Christ. We make a mistake, and we blame it on our humanity. When we sin, we explain it away: ‘We are only human,’ we tell ourselves.

“But Wesleyan folk do not define our humanness by way of our fallenness. We do not sin because we are human. We sin because we are not yet human enough. We are not to take vengeance in our own hands; we are not to retaliate; rather, we are to extend the same love to our enemies that we would extend to our friends. This is what it means to resemble Christ, to pick up our cross and follow him. No theology can survive without a foundation in the nonviolent love of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Today the United States spends 54% of its federal government income on military expenditures. While our teachers go to Target to purchase pencils for their students out of their small salaries, we spend more than the combined total of the next seven largest military spenders in the world on billion-dollar ships and aircraft.

But Jesus’ call to non-violence doesn’t only lead us to thinking about war and military might. It also leads us to look daily at our own lives, our own interactions, and ask where it is that I am being called to “turn the other cheek.” In our families, in our government, in our own denomination, how do Jesus’ words and actions inform our behavior? How do we break the cycle of “an eye for an eye” if we ourselves do not offer an alternative?

You may not yet be able to proclaim yourself a non-violent pacifist, as some in this congregation’s history have over the years. But I submit that if you are seeking to be a disciple of Jesus, then you should be seeking peace in your life that is not dependent on anger, threat, or

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Paul, A Plain Account Website, 2017, <http://www.aplainaccount.org/epiphany-7a-gospel>

intimidation. The *peace that passes all understanding* does not occur through a weapon, a fist, or a harsh word.

In 1960 James Lawson was a young seminary student at Vanderbilt. During the Nashville sit-in movement he had spent months training young black activists to sit at “white-only” lunch counters and not respond to the hostility, beatings, and arrests that would inevitably come. During one of these protests he was approached by an onlooker who screamed a racial slur and spit in his face.

Instead of striking back, Lawson asked the man if he happened to have a handkerchief he could borrow. The man, surprised by the response, reached into his pocket and gave him one. Lawson noticed the man had ridden up on a motorcycle. For the next five minutes they talked about the man’s motorcycle, mechanics, and horsepower. By the end of the conversation, the man asked if there was anything the activists needed.

To turn the other cheek often changes us as much as it changes the one who originally lashes out, because it refuses to define someone by their worst characteristics. Rather, it recognizes the Christ in the other. This is the new life that Jesus offers, and we are invited in the process to become even more human than we are today. Amen.