

22nd Sunday in Ordinary time
Aug. 31 & Sept. 1, 2013
(Labor Day Weekend)

All Saints Church
Rev. Fred Daley

Our Choice: Non-violence or ...

I can never figure out why the Pharisees would, over and over again, invite Jesus to join them at table at their banquets – because he *always* caused trouble, disrupted the meal, and turned their traditional way of thinking upside down... and, I really don't think *Alka-Seltzer* was available in their day!

This weekend, in light of the national debate on whether we should make a military response to the Syrian government's horrific use of chemical weapons in a massacre that killed or wounded over 1400 of their people, including over 450 children, I'm going to – in a little way – turn the customary way Christians have been thinking for the last 1700 years upside-down, by inviting us to reflect a bit on violence: on how the Jesus of the Gospels is thinking and on how his followers were by-and-large thinking for the first 300 years of the Church. (And, I hope nobody will need *Alka-Seltzer* when I'm done!)

I'd like to begin with a story:

In the book: All Quiet on the Western Front, by Erich Maria Remarque, there's a story that I think is appropriate for us to reflect on today:

In the story, Paul Bäumer, the 19-year-old German soldier who narrates the tale, huddles in a large hole made by an exploded shell. Suddenly, a French soldier jumps into the hole. Instinctively, Bäumer stabs the intruder with a small dagger he has concealed. As the moments then pass, Bäumer discovers the man's name is Duval and he is a husband and a father, and he works as a printer. The wounded Duval soon dies propped up against Bäumer. In the silence that follows, the terrified Bäumer speaks to the dead Duval:

“Comrade, I did not want to kill you! If you jumped in here again, I would not do it – if you would be sensible too. But you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called for its appropriate response. It is that abstraction that I stabbed.

“But now – for the first time – I can see that you are a man like me. I had only thought of your hand grenade, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your *life* and *face* and, our *fellowship*.

“Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers' are just as anxious as ours and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying, and the same agony? Forgive me, comrade! How could you be my enemy?”

Bäumer goes on: “If we threw away the rifles and the uniforms – you could be my brother... . Take 20 years of my life, comrade, and stand up; take more – for I do not know what I can ever attempt to do with it, now.”

“...for I do not know what I can ever attempt to do with it, now....”

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My sisters and brothers, as a result of his tragic encounter with Duval, the young German soldier Paul Bäumer, will never see life the same way again; he will never see men and women as mere labels or numbers or nationalities. This weekend, we must remember that the contemplated surgical strikes at military bases in Syria will kill more than *abstractions* or *numbers* or *labels* or *nationalities*, ... they will kill “poor devils” like Duval, most likely drafted into Service, powerless over the decisions made by their immoral government – some probably still in their teens, who will not return home for supper some night soon, who will never see their wives and children again; there will be worried mothers in Syria who will receive that dreaded phone call, and so the evil cycle of war and violence continues – adding more casualties to the over 100,000 Syrians that have died in this conflict to date.

My brothers and sisters, throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls us to see one another – even our enemies – not as “abstractions,” “labels,” or “impersonal demographics” – but rather as sacred and holy children of God – a God who is Father and Mother to us all, and ourselves, therefore, as sisters and brothers, created with profound dignity in the image and likeness of our God. When a person kills another person, Jesus teaches, we’re killing a child of God, a brother or sister.

As Christians we must remember that for the last 1700 years, by-and-large, Christians have ignored this primary teaching of Jesus: that violence is an *immoral* means to solve conflict, that violence is the antithesis of what Jesus was all about, that violence begets violence, that ‘those who live by the sword will die by the sword.’ By ignoring this teaching of Jesus, Christians have killed more Christians and others persons, than any other world religion in history.

Jesus summarized all of his teachings in the command: “Love God and your neighbor.” What Jesus meant by neighbor is not vague or unclear: Jesus meant to include everybody – as we see in today’s Gospel story... even outcasts:

- for Jesus there’s no head of the table for the privileged, and bottom of the table for the less honorable;
- for Jesus there are no insiders: friends, relatives, wealthy neighbors; and outsiders: symbolized in the Gospel by the poor, the crippled, the homeless and the blind;
- for Jesus, all are welcome at the Table of the Lord and all are welcome around the table of the global village... no exceptions!

Jesus even invited enemies to the table: “Love your enemy” is not marginal to our faith – it is central. When Jesus tells us to love our enemy, he is telling us to love others in the way God loves us – unconditionally – and you cannot love and kill the same person, in the same act.

On this weekend – as our government contemplates military action in Syria – as hard and foolish as it may sound, as Christians, we are called to love the leaders of the Syrian government just as we are called to love the rebels who are attempting to overthrow that government.

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My sisters and brothers, this is where most Christians walk away from Jesus because it sounds insane... *‘Do you expect me to sit there and do nothing?’ ‘Jesus was just a dreamer from another world, but in this world, let’s get real for God’s sake!’*

Jesus became human to show us the way to help the world become more and more the world that God intended: the Kingdom..., the Realm..., the Reign... of God – a just world where the hungry are fed and the naked, clothed and the homeless, sheltered and the sick cared for.

But Jesus also taught us that we cannot use evil means to accomplish something good: the end doesn’t justify the means. The end we desire and the means we use must be compatible.

The world becomes the world God intends it to be, by following the Gospel principles of love, of justice and mercy and equality and compromise and forgiveness... working together to discover the truth that will set us free

Militarism tries to achieve peace through war, order through chaos, security through violence, the reign of law through lawlessness; to preserve honor through dishonorable acts. In the end, we claim we can save by destroying. We remember the words of a U.S. officer at Bến Tre, Vietnam: “We had to destroy the village, in order to save it.”

The fruits of war are death, hunger, suffering, moral degradation, arson, rape, lying, murder and ...more war! There are some things worse than war – and war brings every one of them with it.

The Gospel challenge of 2000 years ago – ignored for the last 1700 years by Christians (with notable exceptions like St. Francis of Assisi, the Quakers and Dorothy Day with the Catholic Workers) – remains the same Gospel challenge of the 21st century: how might we be able to solve our conflicts – in our hearts, in our relationships and families, in our neighborhoods and nations, in our global village – nonviolently?

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Brothers and sisters, just imagine where the world might be today if Christians took Jesus' teachings seriously and, both individually and collectively, put just a bit of our time, energy, creativity, and money into developing nonviolent means to solve conflicts instead of into inquisitions and burnings-at-the-stake and crusades and holocausts and excommunications...?

Let us reflect on a powerful example:

This last week we as a nation have been commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the historic March on Washington that marked the turning point in the civil rights movement that culminated in the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act and the Equal Housing Act, that began the crumbling the walls of prejudice and racism and segregation born from the evil of slavery that tarnished everything for which our nation stands.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took the nonviolent teachings of Jesus seriously and with his dream of the 'beloved community' showed us that there are nonviolent ways to seek to solve conflict and we've seen the model creatively used in the Philippines, South Africa and elsewhere.

I had the privilege of being at the Lincoln Memorial on Wednesday, at the Celebration and as I looked around at the tens of thousands of folks – many of them whom were at the first march 50 years ago – blacks and whites, young and old, rich and poor, children and the elderly, presidents and the unemployed, gay and straight, my heart – and I'm sure the hearts of many of us – were moved by hope that maybe, just maybe... the dream of Jesus, the dream of St. Francis of Assisi, the dream of Gandhi, the dream of Dorothy Day, the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ...might just become more of a reality in our time. As Dr. King pointed out so often: 'the clock of history is almost at midnight – we have a choice: is it nonviolence or, nonexistence? We have the choice...

On this Labor Day weekend, I will conclude with the words of Dr. King from an article written in 1966 entitled: "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom":

Dr. King states:

"There is no easy way to create a world where men and women can live together, where each has his own job and house and where all children receive as much education as their minds can absorb. But if such a world is created in our lifetime, it will be done in the United States by Negroes and white people of good will. It will be accomplished by persons who have the courage to put an end to suffering by willingly suffering themselves rather than inflict suffering upon others. It will be done by rejecting the racism, materialism and violence that has characterized Western civilization and especially by working toward a world of brotherhood, cooperation and peace." - (p. 61, [A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#))

Amen.