

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 6: Reconnecting With Nonviolence

Matthew 5:9; 26:47-56 Psalm 85:8-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 2, 2015

This morning we are going to explore yet another way to connect with God, a way to sense the Presence of the Sacred in our midst. This time, it's in and through a reconnection with an attitude and practice of nonviolence. That's something that is near and dear to most of our hearts, and own model of ministry.

Deeply intertwined with nonviolence is the matter of being a peacemaker. In the section of the Gospel of Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the opening verses of chapter 5 called The Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims, **"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"** (Matt. 5:9). The question we face, then, is **what does it mean to be a peacemaker?** What does that look like for you as an individual – in your home and workplace? For us as a congregation? For us as Christians? Do I dare ask, for us as a nation?

Have you noticed, however, that you can't go very far down the road of talking about peace and nonviolence without entering the realm of politics? That includes issues from military intervention in other countries to gun violence prevention in our own communities. Even though answers are often complex, we are called by God, nonetheless, to peacemaking through nonviolence. So within our own little world that you and I live in daily we must never stop striving for and working toward an approach to life and creation itself that is nonviolent.

For a majority of us, that most likely pertains more specifically to verbal, psychological, and spiritual violence, than it does to physical violence. We are all probably guiltier of it than we realize. **A commitment to peacemaking through nonviolent means becomes, in fact, a vital part of our own spirituality and spiritual growth. Why? Because attitudes and acts of nonviolence connect us with the very heart of God that dwells deep within the core of our own being, and the core of all being.**

Interestingly, one of the persons hailed as the twentieth century's most Christ-like figure was **Mahatma Gandhi** of India. He, of course, wasn't a Christian, but a Hindu. Gandhi even displayed a picture of Jesus with an inscription below that read, "He is our Peace." And as Gandhi used to say, if Christians had actually done what Jesus taught us to do – namely, love our enemy – the world would long ago have been transformed. He strongly believed that an eye for an eye would only make the whole world blind. **So we, as Gandhi suggested, must turn our belief in Jesus into following the ways of Jesus. In other words, to turn our creeds back into deeds.**

John Philip Newell, in his book I have been using as a guide in this sermon series, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, puts it this way:

The great offering of Christ to humanity was not about salvation *from* the world. It was about salvation *of* the world. Jesus showed a way of transformation from the injustices and violence that dominated the world of international relations and domestic affairs.

For Gandhi, the ends never justified the means. The same can be said of the work and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wrong must never be used to combat wrong. **Violence simply begets more violence.** Again, we see this in the escalation of verbal abuse as much or more so than physical violence. That's why the apostle Paul offers the admonishment in Romans 12:21 to **overcome evil not with more evil, but with good. That is our challenge. And it's a tough one.**

More specifically, Gandhi also wisely taught, **“Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred.”** We need to take a closer look at the issue of counter-hatred. Jesus demonstrated this when he scolded one of his followers for cutting off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves when they came to arrest him. Jesus admonishes him, **“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”** (Matt. 26:52). **We can apply that metaphorically in our own lives, to put our “swords” back into their place. Counter-hatred is indeed a big problem, even for good Christian folks. In fact, I believe that we must be careful that when we call out others for their hatred we don't become haters in return.** Maybe that's our deepest point of connection with the call to nonviolence. I have an example that I think highlights the issue of counter-hatred, which is a form of violence unto itself.

Beginning just over a week ago I was a part of what might be labeled a kerfuffle in the progressive community. More accurately, I'm the one who somewhat inadvertently started it. The issue boiled down to how to make an appropriate response to bias, prejudice and bigotry, something we all know is a problem here in Tulsa.

Here's just a bit of background. There is a loose knit group in Tulsa called the **“Say No To Hate” Coalition**. It was organized locally in 1988 to counter a KKK rally here in Tulsa. This isn't to be confused with the **“NO H8” Campaign** that formed nationally in response to California's passage of Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriage in 2008. The mission of NO H8 is to promote LGBT equality, while the Say No To Hate Coalition seeks to confront *any* bias and bigotry, and especially racism. One of the lessons that MANY of us learned this past week is that these are not the same organization, like many of us believed. Nor do they have the same goals or tactics.

Now, getting back to the story. I don't have much of a problem calling a card-carrying member of the KKK a hater. But the Say No To Hate Coalition has called for rallies to counter other groups that, in my opinion, might be a bit harder to claim are based on actual hatred. Last week at City Hall there was a rally in support of the Confederate Battle Flag. In response, the Say No To Hate Coalition created a Facebook page calling for folks to gather at the same location following the flag rally for a “Sweep the Hate Away Rally.” So this is what I posted on the Facebook page:

Perhaps this is not the proper forum for this comment, but I personally believe the entire issue involves a great deal of ignorance, as much or more so than actual hatred on the part of many. Categorizing, demonizing and labeling everyone not on the 'same page' of justice/injustice issues as a "hater" may not be the best approach toward those with whom we disagree. My concern is the use of the word "hate,"

rather than a necessary and appropriate response that is peaceful and non-confrontational...

My point, in the context of this sermon, is that **when we categorically label others as haters, we might be guilty of contributing to verbal violence**. I also stated in a later post on that same Facebook thread, "There are implications of the phrase "Say No To Hate" that are problematic. For **not everything done in opposition to our [progressive] view of social justice is done out of actual hatred.**" Now, I'm not implying that another's ignorant or bigoted words or actions aren't received as being hateful. Rather, I simply question whether anyone has the ability to know the heart, mind and intentions of another so fully as to automatically attribute their words and actions as coming from a place of actual hatred. Ignorance, fear, prejudice, even bigotry, yes. But hatred? In my opinion, that's a different theological matter that easily delves into the realm of violence if diagnosed improperly.

When I visited about all this with the President of Phillips Theological Seminary, Gary Peluso-Verdend, a few days ago, he affirmed that **the ultimate goal of the gospels doesn't stop with justice, but rather justice followed by reconciliation. I see little to no reconciliation with these rallies and counter-rallies**. There has to be a better way, a way that draws people into relationship through dialogue, understanding, and a lot of patience. That has been my approach with Presbyterian pastor colleagues with whom I have disagreed over issues of gender and sexual orientation equality. Building and nurturing relationships between ourselves and others with whom we disagree is vital to any real progress.

This real life example has helped me realize that **living into a life of nonviolence – particularly verbal and emotional nonviolence – is harder than it seems**. To think otherwise would be naïve. Perhaps you've had a similar encounter of some kind in our own experience. Such encounters can be used to remind us that **reconnecting with nonviolence in all its forms is an integral part of connecting with God**. Therefore, if nothing else, perhaps we might all think twice about how we react and respond to others.

As children of God, let us work hard to be nonviolent peacemakers.

Amen.

Resources:

John Phillip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014