

The Way of Peace: Non-Violence and Non-Violent Resistance.
H. Stephen Shoemaker
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Peace, Peace, Peace. Just as there are many forms of light, soft light brilliant light, early morning light and last light before evening, so there are many forms of peace, peace with God, peace inside yourself, peace with others, the peace that passes all understanding and the peace whose understanding we try to avoid, for the demands it lays upon us. This last kind of peace has been the emphasis last week and now this week: “The Way of Peace: Non-Violence and Non-Violent Resistance.

Our vision from Isaiah today is really two visions the first is God’s vision for what a king should be like; the second is God’s dream for the world.

I

What kind of king does God want? Or as it applies to us, what kind of democracy or nation does God want?

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Are you ever amazed at the indomitable character of life in nature, like green shoots from an apparently dead stump?

From Jesse's lineage, the lineage of David, as good as dead, comes God's kind of king. The Spirit of God shall rest upon him, Isaiah says, "a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and reverence for God." Reverence is his *delight*, reverence that is humble acknowledgement of the limits of one's own goodness, wisdom and power and the reverence of one who kneels before God's goodness, wisdom and power. That's what a nation needs in its leader and leaders.

Such a king, leader will not make decisions, Isaiah says, based on what he or she sees and hears, by the morning news or the latest polls.

Such a king will bring righteousness: justice for the poor and help for the meek of the earth. God's righteousness makes things *right*, straightens our what is crooked. Amos the prophet had vision of a giant plumb-line God dropped from heaven to earth showing us right from wrong, good from evil. Sometimes we lose sight of that. How we need such a plumb-line today.

II

The second vision is of the Peaceable Kingdom, God's vision for the whole world. Wolf shall lie down with the lamb, calf and lion and fatling together, and a small child shall herd them. Cow and bear will graze together and the lion will become a vegetarian and eat straw like and ox.

Some may say: Get real! The lion is *always* ready to lie down with a lamb. It's the lamb I'm worried about. (We saw what happened last week when the Panther lay down with the Redskin.)

Of course, the vision is a parable, of how God wants us all to live together.

One of the icons of American art is the painting of the Peaceable Kingdom by Quaker artist and minister Edward Hicks. In this folk-art masterpiece, the animals are gathered in perfect harmony.

The Quakers were, and still are, pacifists, a religious community devoted to Jesus' teachings on non-violence. I may have told you the story of the Quaker farmer milking his cow. Three times the cow kicked over the milk bucket. The farmer said to the cow, "Thou knowest that I am a Quaker and cannot strike thee, but if thou kickest the bucket over one more time, I will sell thee to a Baptist!"

(We will hear about the Baptists later.)

If you gaze at Hicks' painting your eye first falls on the colorful array of animals. But if your eye then drifts to the side, you see in the distance a peace treaty being signed between Native Americans and the New Americans, arranged by William Penn, Quaker Governor of Pennsylvania. Isaiah's vision is meant for *earth* and for *us*.

The last words of the vision stir my heart:

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters that cover the sea.

Our holy calling is to help fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord.

III

Now let's turn to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. All through the Sermon Jesus was deepening the meaning of the Mosaic law. Five times he audaciously said "You've heard it was said of old [meaning the Mosaic law], but now I say to you." It was enough to get a person killed.

The last two times he used this formula, he offered the way of non-violence as the path to peace.

You've heard it said "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also.

And then:

You've heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy", but I say to you, love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

And why?

So that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven.

For God, Jesus said, describing the character of *Abba*,

...makes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust.

Here is the “impartial goodness” of God to all, beyond our categories of good and evil.

In other words, Jesus is calling us to imitate this God who loves all people. Imitate. Decades ago, the secular journalist Sydney Harris said sardonically: “God could well do with less praise and more imitation from his followers.”

Anybody can love those who love you, Jesus said, We can do better! As the poet W.H. Auden wrote:

You shall love your crooked neighbor
With you crooked heart.¹

IV

The phrase in Jesus’ sermon that often trips us up is “resist not evil.” Does this mean we just let evil roam and destroy? Here is how I interpret it as of today, December 8, 2019. To “resist not evil” means to refrain from *returning* evil for

evil. Vengeance is a never-ending cycle of death. An African proverb says that to pursue vengeance is like drinking poison believing your enemy will die.

We *are* called to resist evil in our world, but as followers of Jesus, to do so non-violently. Our American exemplar of non-violent resistance is Martin Luther King Jr, who is easy to memorialize but hard to emulate. He led the most powerful movement of non-violent social change in our history. He resisted the injustice of our American way of life, but he did so non-violently. He said,

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

When asked how he could love his enemy, even the ones bent on doing him harm, he said, “Because I believe there is something of the best in the worst of us and something of the worst in the best of us.”

He had learned from Ghandi who had led a massive movement of non-violent resistance against colonial rule in India. Ghandi had learned it from Jesus.

The people who joined King in the Civil Rights Movement were trained in the way of non-violence. If the movement had turned to violence as their means, the hoped for social change would not have happened.

In America the number one way of non-violent social change is the ballot box. But sometimes other means of social change are needed. Like taking to the streets in non-violent witness and protest.

V

Another way is by day by day becoming a non-violent person yourself, in word, thought and deed. Can we practice unilateral disarmament in thought, speech and action?

Or, by being a church that does not go around pretending that Jesus didn't say "Love your enemy."

Let's go back to that Baptist the Quaker farmer threatened to sell his cow to. The earliest Baptists were the European Anabaptists (their closest cousins today are the Mennonites). *Anabaptist* means to "baptize again." They said the only true baptism was "believer's baptism", when you are old enough to know what it means to follow Jesus. As such they were persecuted and killed. But as followers of Jesus they were pacifists and practiced non-violence. There's a famous story about a 16th century Anabaptist leader named Dirk Willems. He had escaped from a prison by letting himself down from a window with a rope of knotted rags. He was running from a guard trying to re-capture him. He ran across a lake covered with ice. The man following him suddenly fell through a thin place in the ice.

Willems turned back and saved his life; and then, was arrested, tortured and killed.

Somewhere along the way Baptists, as most Christians, began to ignore Jesus' teaching on non-violence. In the first 300 years Christians were largely pacifists. Then Constantine the Emperor legalized Christianity and adopted it as a way of unifying the Empire under one religion. We began to dilute Jesus' teaching. We now had to serve both Empire and Christ; and often service to the State took precedence. Ever since the "peace church" and pacifist tradition has been a minority witness in Christ's church.

When I was in Kentucky a man told me that growing up in his Kentucky Baptist Church he was in R.A.'s, Royal Ambassadors, the Baptist equivalent of Boy Scouts. At the State R.A. summer camp there were Army recruiters who set up a table to make it easy to enlist for military duty.

Although I was a Royal Ambassador, that never happened to me, but I have long pondered why in Southern Baptist churches military service was the only option of conscience in war-time. The historic option of "conscientious objection" was never mentioned, that is, that person could under the law avoid military service from religious conviction, or be given a non-combatant role in the military.

My professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Seminary was Henlee Barnette. He and his wife Helen raised two sons who came of age during the war in Vietnam. One son signed up for and served in the military in Vietnam. The other went to Canada to avoid being put in a position of having to kill another person. Both acted out of a sense of conscience and duty. Henlee and Helen loved both sons, and they supported them both.

Could churches be like that? And support their daughters and sons in the formation of their conscience and then give them the freedom to follow where conscience leads them?

I asked this question last week: Are we willing to be a “moral minority” in our world. I have learned to have some measure of distrust in *Moral Majorities*, especially when they themselves claim so. Martin Luther King said that we need to be “morally maladjusted” to a world of hate and injustice. Will we merely adjust ourselves to racism and bigotry, to thousands of immigrant children separated from their parents forever and put in cages, to official lies and to the escalating gap between the rich and the poor?

Through the centuries the church has wrestled with the issue: does culture form our conscience more than Christ? The Christ who died at the hands of violence rather than taking up violence himself? Why do we have a cross on our

steeple and on the front wall of the church? Because Jesus chose non-violence as the way of the kingdom of God.

VI

Can we be stirred by the visions of Isaiah and the teachings of Jesus?

Wendell Berry once wrote a poem of his vision of a world redeemed, his own Peaceable Kingdom. It is a beautiful vision. At the end of it he says:

.... This is no paradisaal dream.

Its hardship as its possibility.²

Berry, though not a church-goer, is a follower of Jesus' teaching and applies it to all his life. In a poem called "Questionnaire" he leaves us with these questions:

1. How much poison are you willing
to eat for the success of the free
market and global trade? Please
name your preferred poisons.

2. For the sake of goodness, how much
evil are you willing to do?

Fill in the following blanks
with the names of your favorite
evils and acts of hatred.

....

4. In the name of patriotism and
the flag, how much of our beloved
land are you willing to desecrate?

List in the following spaces
the mountains, rivers, towns, farms
you could most readily do without.

5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes,
the energy sources, the kinds of security,
for which you would kill a child. Name please, the children whom
you would be willing to kill.³

I don't think Jesus would ask us any easier questions.

1. W. H. Auden, "As I Walked Out One Evening", *Collected Poems* (N.Y. Random House, 1976), p. 115.

2. Wendell Berry, "A Vision", *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1998)

3. Wendell Berry, "Questionnaire", *Leavings*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2010), p. 14.

