

Peace with Enemies

(Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:27-36; Rom. 12:9-18)

We continue this morning wrestling with the question of how we live as Peacemakers in our context today. We've spent time talking about various aspects of peace with God, with others, with ourselves, and with creation. This morning I am returning to the theme of peace with others. A couple months ago I preached a sermon about how do we pursue peace with those we disagree with. We looked at the example of Jesus and how he confronted injustice but also extended hospitality, grace, forgiveness, love. And I talked about the practice of contemplation and pausing long enough to see the humanity of the other person, to see them as God does.

I wanted to extend this conversation a bit further with an eye towards not just how we respond to those we may disagree with but even those who are actively wishing or working for harm and doing violence in our world, whether that violence is physical, verbal, emotional, spiritual, psychological...violence in all its forms. And whether it is towards us or towards those we ally with. So I want to speak about non-violence, this core value of Anabaptism that is part of our Confession of Faith where we read "**Led by the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ in the way of peace, doing justice, bringing reconciliation, and practicing nonresistance even in the face of violence and warfare.**" (p. 81). Non-violence has been central to Anabaptism so I wanted to reflect on this value and how it may apply to us today in our context.

1. Love your Enemies

We heard read Jesus' words in Matthew 5, teaching us to love our enemies, to pray for those who harass us. We see a similar passage in Luke 6:27-36 where we read: "**But I say to you who are willing hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you....Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you....Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.**"

These passages highlight one of Jesus' harder teachings. He calls people to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you. If you're like me, you love the sound of this, you heartily agree to this...in theory. But when the rubber hits the road it is *so* difficult to actively live out. When someone is perpetuating hate and violence it can be awfully hard to meet that hatred with active love.

- I think here of global violence and harm. We heard Lynn Caldwell speak last Sunday about the horrible treatment of Palestinians and the violence being done to that people group.
- I think of the ways Scripture has been abused and the Church has perpetuated discrimination and hate against people based on race, orientation, religion, gender, etc. Or the spiritual abuse done to people in churches.
- I think of the ongoing violence and harm being done to immigrants that we've witnessed in North America recently.

- This Tuesday is the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ People/Red Dress Day so I think of the violence done to this group.

I could go on but I think of these things, of the incredible and very real harm being done to people, and there is a part of me that wants to meet this violence and harm with the same. If not physical violence, at least in word and attitude. And yet, I do desire to follow the Christ in their example of love and in their teaching here of loving enemies and I really do believe that meeting violence with violence is NOT the answer and will only continue this destructive cycle. So how do we live this ‘love your enemies’ teaching out?

Now, to wrestle with that question what I want to do is share some examples of others who I find inspiring, people who have wrestled firsthand with how to live out these words of Jesus in incredibly difficult circumstances. And then glean some practical wisdom from these individuals to help us.

2. Stories

I’ve spoken to some of you recently about my little obsession with the friendship between the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. Part of my obsession with them comes from the fact they are simply hilarious together. If you are in need of a smile, look up some YouTube videos of the two of them. But more than this, I am fascinated by their life stories and what they have come to stand for.

a. Desmond Tutu

Desmond Tutu was a South African Anglican bishop. He became known throughout the world through his non-violent resistance to the Apartheid regime in South Africa. After this regime ended, he was the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which strove to deal with the immense injustices that had occurred in his country. Rather than just doling out revenge and punishment, this Commission sought to give voice to victims and uncover the truth, but also work toward reconciliation rather than revenge. Tutu and others would sit through testimonies of people who were blinded and maimed, tortured, had loved ones, even their children, killed. Horrific stories of unimaginable evil. This was done not to prove guilt and win a trial but to honestly engage with the truth of what happened and work towards forgiveness and wholeness.

Despite witnessing all this evil, Tutu remained committed to nonviolence, to compassion, to ending the cycle. He taught **“When we see others as the enemy, we risk becoming what we hate. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves.”** ([desmond tutu quotes about nonviolence – Google](#))

Not only this, he also remained convinced of humanity’s goodness despite seeing humanity at its worst. He also said, **“We’ve always got to be recognizing that despite the aberrations, the fundamental thing about humanity, about humankind, about people, is that they are good, they were made good, and they really want to be good.”** (Book of Joy, p. 120).

b. Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama was born in a rural home in Tibet in 1935 but at the age of two was taken to his nation's palace and raised as the future spiritual and political leader of Tibet. When he was only around 15, China invaded his country and he was thrust into active leadership of his nation and people. For years he tried to negotiate peace but when that didn't work and tensions continued escalating, when he was around 23, he decided to flee the country in hopes of preserving Tibet's tradition and continue working for peace. He's lived in exile ever since, for over 60 years. So here we have a leader of a people who experienced invasion, occupation and violence, yet he likewise refuses to continue the cycle of violence. In accepting the Nobel Peace prize he stated, **“our struggle must remain non-violent and free of hatred. We are trying to end the suffering of our people—not inflict suffering upon others.”** ([The 14th Dalai Lama – Acceptance Speech - NobelPrize.org](#))

c. Dalai Lama's friend Lupon-la

The Dalai Lama also tells the story of a friend of his who was arrested in Tibet and sent to a remote camp for 18 years, what he called a Chinese Gulag. His friend and the others at this camp were forced into work, starved, tortured. The Dalai Lama says, **“When he left the camp, only twenty people had survived. He told me that during those eighteen years he faced some real dangers. I thought, of course, he was talking about dangers to his life. He told me he was in danger of losing...his compassion for his Chinese guards.”** (Book of Joy, pp. 155-156). Here was a man striving to hold onto his compassion for the very people torturing him and his fellow Tibetans. Refusing to meet violence with violence, hate with hate, and instead meeting it with determined love and compassion.

d. Martin Luther King Jr.

Before telling some of Martin Luther King Jr's story I do want to acknowledge that there are some controversies surrounding his personal and academic life. I don't mean to minimize or ignore that reality but I also want to highlight his commitment to nonviolence and some of the wisdom we can glean there.

So King in his role as one of the leaders of the civil rights movement endured a lot of violence. He was arrested numerous times, assaulted, his home was bombed, he was stabbed, and ultimately he was assassinated. Despite the violence being done to him and to so many others that he was standing up for, he strove to practice nonviolence. After his house was bombed he said, **“We cannot solve this problem through violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence.”** ([On Jan 30, 1956: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Home Bombed in Montgomery, Alabama](#)). The Center created in his name emphasizes that **“Nonviolence is a love-centered way of thinking, speaking, acting, and engaging that leads to personal, cultural and societal transformation.”** ([The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365® - The King Center](#)). Note it is *love*-centered and incorporates not just the absence of violence but the active pursuit of change through non-violence.

e. Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi is one of the most famous non-violent activists who resisted the British colonial rule in India through nonviolent resistance in the early 1900's. He's inspired nonviolent resistance throughout the world. But he too witnessed and experienced much violence being imprisoned for years, assaulted and eventually assassinated in 1948.

And yet he too was steadfastly committed to nonviolent resistance. On the website mkgandhi.org it says, "**Gandhi understood nonviolence from its Sanskrit root *"Ahimsa"*. Ahimsa is just translated to mean nonviolence in English, but it implies more than just avoidance of physical violence. Ahimsa implies total nonviolence, no physical violence, and no passive violence. Gandhi translates Ahimsa as love. This is explained by Arun Gandhi in an interview,...**"(Gandhi) said ahimsa means love. Because if you have love towards somebody, and you respect that person, then you are not going to do any harm to that person." ([Gandhi's philosophy of Non-violence | Africa needs Gandhi](#)).

For Gandhi, nonviolence aimed at "**winning the enemy through love and patient suffering. It aims at winning over an unjust law, not at crushing, punishing, or taking revenge against the authority, but to convert and heal it.**" (ibid). When met with violence and harm, Gandhi taught humanity to seek even their healing.

f. Leymah Gbowee (Lay-ma jeh-Bo-wee)

Leymah Gbowee is a Liberian woman who lived through 2 brutal civil wars in her country. She experienced death and atrocities as everyday occurrences, living in fear. She then initiated a nonviolent movement for peace in her nation. As with others on this list, she was eventually awarded with the Nobel Peace prize for her leadership in this regard. She taught, "**We were aware that the end of the war will only come through non-violence, as we had all seen that the use of violence was taking us and our beloved country deeper into the abyss of pains, death, and destruction.**" ([Leymah Gbowee – Nobel Lecture - NobelPrize.org](#)). Again recognizing the folly of using violence to overcome violence, she committed to the way of non-violence in order to bring about change and justice.

g. Jesus

Of course we can think of Jesus himself. When unjustly arrested, put on trial, mocked and beaten and eventually killed, Jesus did not meet that violence with violence or hate but with love and forgiveness. In fact when one of his followers struck a guard with a sword, Jesus stepped in to heal the guard and ensure peace. And then, as he hung on the cross dying, Jesus says, "**Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.**" (Lk. 23:34).

And I could mention many more examples of people who remained committed to meeting violence and hate with non-violence and compassion. I could speak of a famous one from Anabaptist history with Dirk Willems offering compassion to his captor but I want to move on to reflect on what we can glean from these people and their teaching that can impact our lives here and now.

3. Wisdom from nonviolent activists

And I do realize that we are in a blessed situation where, in our present context, most of us do not experience the same violence as some of these people. But that doesn't mean this doesn't apply to us as each of us here has people or groups in our lives for whom we care deeply and who *do* experience violence, if not physically, maybe verbally or systemically. So how can this ideal of loving enemies, of meeting violence with nonviolence, influence us in our various roles as we work for social justice today in our context? A few things stuck out to me in reflecting on these stories.

a. Prayer for enemies.

First, whether it was prayer as we understand it in the Christian tradition, or a form of meditation, it was striking to me the role this played in many stories. Sincerely praying for those doing violence, for their transformation but also for their well-being. I imagine they often didn't feel like doing this but there was a commitment to the practice, to using prayer or meditation to grow in love. The effect of this type of prayer is often more about changing the heart of the person praying, inspiring compassion in the pray-er

b. Emphasize common humanity.

Secondly, the emphasis on our common humanity was striking. In *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu speak to this with the Dalai Lama stating, **“We need unbiased love toward entire humanity, entire sentient beings, irrespective of what their attitude is toward us. So your enemies are still human brothers and sisters, so they also deserve our love, our respect, our affection.”** (p. 78). And he talked about looking to our common humanity rather than emphasizing what can divide and said, **“When we relate to others from the place of compassion it goes to the first level, the human level, not the secondary level of difference. Then you can even have compassion for your enemy.”** (p. 127).

For many of these activists, a primary motivation for nonviolence was a recognition that we are all one human family and so offering love to even our enemies was the natural and logical response, even in the face of violence and hate.

c. Oppose and resist the evil, not the person.

Thirdly and relatedly there was emphasis put on actively opposing and resisting the evil (non-violence is not passivity), but not the person perpetrating it. Martin Luther King's center states, **“Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence recognises that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people. The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat evil, not people.”** ([The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365® - The King Center](#)). Gandhi's teaching included striving to win **“over an unjust law, not at crushing, punishing, or taking revenge against the authority, but to convert and heal it.”** ([Gandhi's philosophy of Non-violence | Africa needs Gandhi](#)). And the Dalai Lama stated, **“You must not hate those who do harmful things...The compassionate thing is to do what you can to stop them—for they are harming themselves as well as those who suffer from their actions.”** (Book of Joy, p. 226). The aim is not to defeat the person, but to seek even their healing, even as we oppose the harm being done.

d. Meeting violence with violence will only continue the cycle

Lastly, I'll mention the emphasis put on the logical argument that meeting violence with violence will only continue the cycle and add more suffering. Again, Martin Luther King Jr.'s center speaks to this when it says, "**Dr. King believed that the age-old tradition of hating one's opponents was not only immoral, but bad strategy which perpetuated the cycle of revenge and retaliation.**" ([The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365® - The King Center](#)). Gandhi argued that the means *had* to match the ends, that unjust or violent means will never accomplish just and peaceful ends. Leymah Gbowee argued the same in her quote I read earlier.

Each of these people recognized the foolishness in meeting violence with violence. That doing so only brought more harm and suffering into the world and to ourselves and could never end the cycle of violence. This idea that is so popular in our world that if we could just crush our enemies and then all will be well and peaceful, isn't only unjust, it makes no logical sense.

4. Conclusion:

Ok, much more could be said about each of these stories and these people and what we could glean from them but I need to wrap things up here. So I want to end by saying: committing to meeting violence and hatred with love and non-violence does not mean all will go well for us in each situation. I'm not naïve enough to think that love will solve every last situation we find ourselves in, in that exact moment. The hate and violence may continue. The person doing harm may not change their minds or behavior in each individual circumstance. Maybe it will happen, often it doesn't. But what we *can* know for sure, is that meeting violence and hate with the same will *never* end the cycle. We know for sure (and world history teaches us) that violent means will not bring about a peaceful end. And so we have a choice to make: do we want to be part of the solution or do we want to simply continue the cycle? Again here I am not just speaking about physical violence but also about verbal, slander, malice, harboring hate.

And I know it is easier said than done. We all fall short of this at times. And I am also not advocating for a 'forgive and forget' mentality or for us to deny or repress the emotions we may have in response to people's hatred and violence. Denying our humanity is also not the answer. There will be times and people where we lack the capacity to actively love them and we must put up some boundaries, and that is ok. Sometimes the best we can do for a season or with a particular person is just not actively hate. We may feel it and we may need to work through it honestly without denying it. As a friend of mine liked to say, we strive for the ideal and deal with the real. So we seek to actively love but at any given time we may not have full capacity to engage, and that is ok. In those times where actively loving someone seems beyond me, my hope is to at least commit to *not* actively bring more hate or violence into the world even as I seek capacity to love better.

And so I am grateful for the people I mentioned and their stories of meeting hate with love, violence with non-violence. I am grateful for Jesus and his teaching on loving our enemies and then his example of living it out. May we learn from them and commit to the way of peace in praying for those who perpetuate harm and hate, recognizing our common humanity and interdependence, having compassion for the person even as we actively oppose the harm they might be bringing, and through it all refusing to meet hate and violence with the same.

References

Tutu, Desmond; Dalai Lama; Douglas Abrams. The Book of Joy (2016).

[desmond tutu quotes about nonviolence - Google Search](#)

[The 14th Dalai Lama – Acceptance Speech - NobelPrize.org](#)

[On Jan 30, 1956: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Home Bombed in Montgomery, Alabama](#)

[The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365® - The King Center](#)

[Gandhi's philosophy of Non-violence | Africa needs Gandhi](#)

[Leymah Gbowee – Nobel Lecture - NobelPrize.org](#)

Benediction:

- From the Book of Joy: “The Archbishop often liked to quote one of his heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in turn was quoting one of his heroes, an abolitionist minister named Theodore Parker, who said: ‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’” (pp. 117-118). As we go from this place may we strive for justice in our world. May we seek to not meet violence and hate with the same. May we seek to follow after Jesus in the way of peace. And may you each experience the peace of God more deeply this week.