

"The Violence of Nonviolence"

Matthew 5:38-48

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Prayer...

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."¹

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..."²

If you were to compile a list of the Top 10 most misunderstood, misused, and abused scriptures in the Bible, one could argue that these verses from Matthew deserve the top spot. Jesus's call to nonviolence has been mutated to justify the oppression of marginalized people and even silence victims and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Yet these same verses have been the guiding principles that led to the end of colonial rule in India and the establishment and expansion of civil rights for People of Color in this country during the movements of the 1950's and 60's. How is it that these same verses can produce such opposing interpretations?

Personally, I can glean no other message from these passages than a call to radical and active nonviolence. Paired with several others, these words form the scriptural and spiritual foundation of my personal ethic and guide me toward how I want to be in this world and how I work to create the world that I believe most accurately reflects the Kingdom of God.

But I have been wrestling with the mandate for nonviolence for the past few years. I think that I've treated it too lightly - - despite countless pages of reading, courses of study, endless prayers and several sermons, and plenty of opportunities to enact nonviolence - - I think I've treated it too lightly.

My mind started turning on this a few years ago around Martin Luther King Day. Discussing my plan to construct a sermon pairing King quotes with scripture much like I did this year, a friend who is a Person of Color stopped me in my tracks when I mentioned this same passage from Matthew that we heard today. While I cannot recall their exact

¹ Matthew 5:38-41

² Matthew 5:43-44

words, I know that I was called out - - called out with love and grace, yet called out nonetheless.

My friend had two critiques of nonviolence: one that was familiar and one I had not really considered. And because I believe that it is important to test, question, examine, and critique our beliefs - - even, or maybe especially, those beliefs about which we are so convicted - - I am called to critique nonviolence. To critique nonviolence is by no means an endorsement of violence. Rather, it is an effort to understand even more deeply those things I profess to believe.

My friend's first critique was one that I had studied and preached about quite a lot: the mischaracterization of Jesus's call to nonviolence as a victim-shaming tool that perpetuates violence and oppression. It is this interpretation that has entered mainstream use, giving rise to the belief that to "turn the other cheek" is to allow oneself to continually be victimized, adopting a position of helplessness or even cowardice. It is the appalling misinterpretation that any effort by the victim or target to resist or stop the abuse is equal to breaking the commandment or is even "unchristian."

Given the pervasiveness of this interpretation, one can be forgiven for thinking Jesus wants us to be pious punching bags. But when you consider the historical context of Jesus's words, you recognize that he is preaching a radical message of resistance and active nonviolence. One of the best contemporary explorations of this is by Walter Wink in his award-winning book, "Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination."³

Wink outlines each of Jesus's responses to acts of violence and oppression, placing us in the time and place in which Jesus lived: a society based on shame and honor, marked by strict boundaries of social castes, under the bloody sword of Roman occupation. Through Walter Wink's interpretation, Jesus is encouraging the one who is targeted to use all that they have to resist attempts at domination and oppression by disrupting expected social norms. These actions upset the balance of power and allow the targeted person to reclaim some dignity and self-determination, often putting the aggressor in a place of shame or vulnerability. Disrupt the power balance and deny the aggressor their expected and sought-after victory. So then, Jesus's call to nonviolence is not a banishment to victimhood, but an invitation to resistance.

That critique seems less problematic and easier to handle than my friend's second critique - - the one that forced me into a wrestling match with my conscience when I searched myself and found myself guilty. In their own words, my friend awakened me to the fact that it is always the targeted people who are told *they* are the ones who need to be nonviolent in the face of relentless violence. The problem of nonviolence is that it is so often the Oppressor demanding that the Oppressed remain nonviolent.

³ Wink, Walter. "Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination." Augsburg Fortress, 1992.

And so I have been questioning if my evangelism of a non-negotiable and universal commitment to nonviolence is in reality an act of violence in-and-of itself. Because when it is someone in a more socially privileged position - - just as I am - - directing someone in a less privileged position to adopt and adhere to nonviolence, the practice of nonviolence becomes violence in-and-of itself. And I am guilty of that.

Look at it this way: I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, educated male. I do not face daily acts of discrimination or racial prejudice. I do not live under the constant threat of violence or discrimination. I can walk into any store and not be followed by the security guard. I can drive through any neighborhood and not be stopped because I'm out-of-place. And if I am stopped by the police, chances are the only damage I'll suffer is to my driving record. I can walk into the men's room or locker room and not be asked to prove my gender. I can go into the voting booth and not have my citizenship questioned. I can stroll down the street and not have racial or homophobic slurs or sexually explicit catcalls hollered at me from passing vehicles.

Oh yes, there have been and will be instances when I feel threatened, targeted, or provoked - - but those are individual acts of disrespect and aggression. I am not subject to the persistent and pervasive threats and abuses of institutionalized violence and oppression. And so, my decision to commit to nonviolence - - while not untested - - is relatively easy. And I've come to recognize that I have assumed that it would be or should be just as easy for others - - others who do not live with the same privileges that I do.

No matter how much I decry it and however hard I might work to dismantle it, I greatly benefit from the accident of birth that secured my place in what we now call the "white cishetero patriarchy." I can deny it and I can fight it, but I will be solidly in the role of "Oppressor" for the foreseeable future. Because of that, I cannot demand that those who are oppressed adopt the means I deem permissible and appropriate to obtain their liberation.

James Cone, often credited with being the founder of Black Liberation Theology, eviscerates the white liberal Christian imperative for nonviolence in his 1975 book, "God of the Oppressed."⁴ As a side note, if you have some spare time and you'd like to have your self-image as a "woke" white person blown to unidentifiable bits, then go ahead and pick up a copy of "God of the Oppressed." It pairs nicely with the Book of Revelation.

Cone calls out the white liberal Christian insistence on nonviolence as a thinly veiled attempt to maintain the status quo of white domination, recognizing the risk to the power and privilege they enjoy.⁵ Cone accuses white liberal theologians of dismissively spiritualizing liberation and reconciliation while refusing to politicize and enact it out of

⁴ Cone, James H. "God of the Oppressed" revised edition. Orbis Books, 1997.

⁵ Cone, p.217

the fear that it might actually bring about diminished power for them.⁶ He refers to this as simply a “bourgeois exercise in intellectual [self-satisfaction].”⁷

Understandably and rightfully so in my opinion, James Cone focuses heavily on the hypocritical means by which white Christians and white theology have enabled and perpetuated white supremacy and systemic racism - - including through the actions and prayers of those who claim to be white allies. But Cone does not spare African American Christians from rebuke. Though he was a great admirer of Rev. Dr. King, Cone was critical of King for, in his words, “not [taking] seriously white violence in America.”⁸ Cone disagrees with King’s claim that “the universe is on the side of justice,” suggesting that such a belief glosses over the seemingly ceaseless reality of violence and injustice.

Despite these criticisms, we would be mistaken if we believed that James Cone was a supporter of violence. Quite the opposite, Cone rejected all forms of violence - - specifically and especially the violence exercised by white people through the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of indigenous people, noting that the United States was built on violence, quoting Black Panther H. Rap Brown’s observation that “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” Just the same, his rebuke of violence was not an endorsement of nonviolence.

While the primary violence of the Oppressor is not always called out and confronted, the violence (or perceived violence) of the Oppressed person is almost always shamed. Many people are quick to cry out against rioters or looters who are often confused with or conflated with protestors. And God forbid if someone who has been targeted or threatened hits a breaking point and reacts violently; God forbid if they forget their place and step out of line. But it is a step too far for many of those same people to unmask institutionalized systems of violence. When violence is coupled with power, the result is a lethal institutionalized system of oppression. Violence is the language of last resort for the Oppressed, but is often the *only* language spoken and understood by the oppressor. They do not have a language of logic or love - - all they have is violence.

In case you doubt this, take 5 minutes and read the newspaper or head to your computer and look up reactions to protestors, politicians, journalists, and everyday citizens who have dared to challenge systems of oppression in this country. You will not find invitations to reasoned dialogue or the pleasantries of tolerance and an “agreement to disagree.” No, you will quickly and almost exclusively find threats of violence: Emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual violence.

These are not just the empty threats of random, faceless internet trolls. Lest we forget, before he became the White-Supremacist-in-Chief, a certain presidential candidate

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Cone, p.43

⁸ Cone, p.203

responded to a nonviolent protestor by suggesting a good ol' fashioned lynching and vicious beating, assuring the aggressors that he'd even pay for their bail.

So to expect only those who live under oppression to unfailingly commit to nonviolence under the daily and unending reality of violence is not only disingenuous, but is violent bordering on cruel.

In the same way that James Cone decries the unquestioned demand for Oppressed people to "turn the other cheek," Rev. Traci Blackmon, Pastor of Christ the King UCC in Florissant, Missouri and Acting Executive Director of the UCC's Justice and Witness ministries, rejects the call for Oppressed people to pray for their enemies. In a recent Facebook blog post titled "Confession of a woman who preaches,"⁹ Rev. Blackmon writes:

"No. I am not praying for them.
I am praying against them.
That is what you do with evil.
Rebuke it.

I am praying for the people who could not sleep last night because they were worried about deportation.

I am praying for children who will have higher to jump because our public education system will fail them and they have no other choices.

I am praying for sick people who fear being uninsured. Once again.

I am praying for those young enough to go to war under leadership that thinks this is a game.

I am praying for families that are threatened.
For the poor.
For the sick.
For those without shelter.

I am not praying for evil.
No matter how high it sits.

I am speaking to it.
I am casting it out.
I am calling it by name."

Both James Cone and Rev. Traci Blackmon proclaim a Christ that challenges the oppressive Roman power structures, but reject the interpretation of Christ that could be viewed as acquiescing to the Oppressor through standing idle in the face of physical threat or

⁹ Rev. Traci Blackmon, Facebook post 2/15/17

practicing a spiritualized Stockholm Syndrome that requires the Oppressed to pray for the welfare of their Oppressor.

It is a different matter all together when the commitment to nonviolence comes through the self-determination of those who live under oppression. Lost also over translation and time is the recognition that this was exactly the case when Jesus preached resistance and nonviolence. We must remember that Jesus was a member of an oppressed group: a landless, itinerant Jew living under Roman occupation.

It certainly was in the interest of the Roman Empire to demand that their subjects remain nonviolent. This false peace was ensured through the "Pax Romana" - - Roman Peace - - maintained through the use of violence. But Pax Christi - - the Peace of Christ - - stands in opposition to this. Jesus's call to nonviolent resistance and his directive to pray for one's enemies was not an edict issued and enforced by the Oppressor.

Jesus's commitment to nonviolence was the choice and the conviction of the one who was oppressed. Nonviolence was an unwavering commitment Jesus lived out up through his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane when he rebuked Peter for striking a centurion with his sword.¹⁰ Even from the cross, Jesus prayed for his enemies, the very men who mocked him and beat him and condemned him to death, and the very men who swung the mallet that drove the nails into his flesh: "...Father forgive them; for they know not what they do."¹¹

Figuratively speaking, many people who call out for or demand that Oppressed people follow nonviolence look far more like the corrupt religious authorities and Roman soldiers than they do Jesus.

So, what do we do with all of this? How does this crisis of conscience inform our own commitments to nonviolence? As for me, I will never stop speaking out against violence. Now guided by the words of James Cone, I will never stop working to resist and dismantle the violence that is around me and within me - - even the violence that benefits me. With the words of Rev. Traci Blackmon in mind, I will more carefully examine my impulse to pray *for* those who commit violence.

Guided by Jesus and Walter Wink, I will maintain my personal commitment to active nonviolence, as I read it in the Gospels. At the same time, I will exercise caution when I preach nonviolence, stopping to look at how the ways I live out and witness to my commitment to nonviolence might be, in reality, an act of violence against the very same people to whom I claim to be an ally. And I will confess and repent for those ways in which I - - out of my position of privilege - - have contributed to the violence of nonviolence. Amen.

¹⁰ John 18:10

¹¹ Luke 23:34a KJV