

## **The Faithful Nonviolence of Jesus**

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Ken Butigan and Pat Bruno, *From Violence to Wholeness*  
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*A society that lacks people of vision  
is a society certain of its end.*

*Perhaps the crisis in our country, our church, our world  
today is a result of a lack of dreamers... to open our minds*

*... to strengthen our hearts... and to employ new energies to change our society.*

-- Leonardo Boff

Jesus' resistance to violence begins on the first page of the gospel and continues through to the end. It is reflected in daily activities of touching, speaking, healing, and eating, but is first born in Jesus' vision of the reign of God.

When we think of the nonviolence of Jesus we often focus on Jesus' response to situations of confrontation and violence. In this essay we will explore such situations, but I suggest that they are not the starting point. This attitude of Jesus is formed long before those confrontational situations take place. In fact, those situations occur most often as a result of his nonviolent vision and approach to life.

The starting place is Jesus' vision of and commitment to **the inclusive love of God** that welcomes all to the one table and creates a world-view that critiques any kind of exclusion as a form of violence. One of the radical nonviolent actions of Jesus therefore is to eat with "sinners" and "tax collectors" and all those others which the society of that time excluded. Sharing a common table is nonviolent resistance to the violence of division. In Jesus' vision, we are all part of one body held in God's all embracing love. This embrace makes each one a sister and brother and thus makes nonviolence possible. One might say therefore that nonviolence is only possible in community.

True community creates an aversion to the roots of violence which define another person as "other," that is, as outside the circle of care. True community roots out violence by dismantling the motive behind so much violence, that the other is not valued. This is what Sr. Helen Prejean was able to demonstrate in her book, *Dead Man Walking*. The person convicted of a crime as well as the victim of that crime are both members of the one body embraced by God's inclusive love. This kind of love rescues and heals the enemy from violence and hatred. In the most basic and literal way it incorporates as a member of the community the one from whom we might be experiencing violence.

If the starting place for exploring the nonviolence of Jesus is in his vision of the all embracing love of God, our reflection is furthered by his **vision of universal healing**. This approach to life includes hope for the basic well-being of the other. This was Jesus' deepest wish for each person he encountered. In the gospel we see him moving among so many kept outside the circle of well-being by institutional violence which claimed that healing and well-being belonged to some and not to others. Jesus always found those who had been pushed outside the circle of care and invited them back into the community through the door of healing. He taught the community that its well-being was somehow tied to the well-being of each member.

Jesus also taught that illness is not the result or fault of personal sin. Rather, the focus should be on the sinful reality that healing is available to some and not to others -- with these "others" most often being poor people and those excluded from the one table. Jesus extends healing, holy power, to the rejected and untouchable of the world. In so doing he demonstrates that no one is outside the circle of well-being. In the life of Jesus bodily healing functions as a social metaphor for another kind of healing.

The third foundation of Jesus' nonviolence is located in his understanding of God and in his approach to worship. The kind of radical love Jesus knows in God creates an awareness that human life is not about appeasing a vengeful God, but about responding in love. **This is a spirituality purified of violence at its very roots.** God, for Jesus and for those who follow the Christian way, is assertively and polemically against death in all its forms and is for life in its fullness. The enemies of Jesus, such as the Herodians and Pharisees, may have had room in their theology for a God who would require someone to suffer and die -- but this is not the God of Jesus. It follows then that Jesus' attitude toward worship is also purified of violence.

The day of worship, the Sabbath, must be in service to the human community and reflect this relationship with a loving God. It does not exclude healing when that is the need. Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath raises a question: What kind of activity would God desire to occur in that privileged time, in a dedicated place such as the temple? What kind of activity in fact best characterizes the God we worship? Jesus is obviously against the violence of worship uncluttered by concern for human suffering. He is also concerned about the quality of the community life of those who gather for worship: are they truly sharing the one table and seeking the well-being of all? There is in Jesus a sense of urgency about reconciliation within the community before one can properly worship. "If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that someone has something against you..." (Mt. 5: 23-24).

Therefore, before we can explore Jesus' nonviolent response to particular situations we must first see that we are talking about a person whose life is committed to the inclusion of all at one table, the well-being to all, and the worship of a God of life, not death. This means a lifestyle built on a commitment to compassion, humility, non-retaliation, forgiveness, truth-seeking, reconciliation and love of others, including one's enemies. This grows out of giving, fasting, praying, trusting, and setting our hearts on the reign of God.

This vision of life accumulated an impressive array of enemies for Jesus. The violence he encountered was intrinsic to the society of his time and eventually became focused on him personally because of the threat he posed to the way things were arranged. What was the threat? The authorities, both religious and political, realized that they would lose their power if enough people believed and acted on what Jesus taught and lived. So resistance to Jesus grew. Throughout his life he knew that people plotted against him (Mk.3:6), that the chief priests and teachers of the law were looking for a way to kill him (Mk. 11:18), and that Herod also wanted to kill him (Lk. 13:31). He was aware of other enemies: Judas, Pilate, and the professional executioners who would mock and beat and nail him to a cross.

This is too often the place we begin to explore Jesus' nonviolent way, but it is born in a far earlier place. Nonviolence was the most natural response in the world for someone deeply committed to inclusive community. Community was the goal, nonviolence a manifestation of and a means to that goal. This commitment to inclusive community in the heart works to create nonviolence in the whole person. True community takes away the motive for violence because it is the great equalizer. The violence of racism, sexism, unequal power, and value based on ability or status finds no place in the Christian perspective.

A vision of the loving community does not always create the reality. The victory of Jesus' love for others is won in the midst of a hostile and extremely violent world. Christ does not invite us to dream about an easy-going love in a perfect utopian society, but to build one in the midst of reality. A key factor in building this nonviolent world is an end to retaliatory activity in the face of physical violence, legal cases and forced conscription. (Mt. 5: 39-42) Jesus obliges active non-resistance to such infringement of self-interest that is destructive of the community. This kind of response is a positive contribution to the demise of the cycle of violent actions and counter-actions. The radical call is for the person to initiate reconciliation no matter who is at fault in the breach of relationship.

While Jesus in these situations was nonviolent he was at the same time determinedly confrontational, and his confrontational performances had their consequences. He is anything but

the complacent victim whose simple goodness aroused opposition from a malevolent set of demonic men, as some would like to portray him. The gospel would have us see clearly that Jesus' goodness is not something passive and private. Rather, it is a goodness that brings him to initiate challenges against certain practices of his day. He provokes and disturbs. He preaches boldly in public despite the danger.

An example of Jesus' initiative is helpful. Let us look at Jesus throwing the money-changers out of the temple. Now, this is not a story of Jesus coming into the temple and being surprised by the activity happening there and responding with a sudden burst of enthusiasm to cleanse the place of worship. Rather, this "buying and selling" activity would have been well known to Jesus. What he initiates and carries out is a carefully conceived act of disruption. By doing so Jesus teaches that compassion and wrath are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Jesus' response to his enemies was a mixture of courage and prudence. We see that at times he dodged danger. (Lk. 4:30, Jn 7:1) But when face-to-face with it he did not flinch, he maintained his dignity, protected his principles, never compromised the truth, and walked the high moral ground.

At some point Jesus began to see the imminent clash between his absolute nonviolence and the atrocious violence of the sinful world in which he lived. He spoke with the disciples of the suffering he was about to endure. His decision to go to Jerusalem marked the depth of his commitment to nonviolence because he knew his opposition awaited him there and were openly saying that they would endanger his life. It was an act of great trust in God to go into the mouth of the dragon. Jesus' life journey would end in Jerusalem, and the question arises: If Jesus knew of the escalation of violence against him, why did he go there? It was not to fulfill some mandate of death, but to be faithful to the divine mandate he struggled to fulfill all his life, that of overcoming those who promoted death, who cultivated its structures, whose allegiance to it is seen in their willingness to kill when it is to their advantage to do so.

The important thing to remember about Jesus is that he leaves the fate of his opponents to God. Like the tradition of the lament psalms from which Jesus comes, he knows how to acknowledge the reality of evil, resist it, and then place it in God's hands for final resolution. In the nonviolent acceptance of death Jesus acts in a way which is healing and liberating, precisely the reverse of the murderous reign of hatred and violence he experienced. Jesus is condemned, punched, spat upon, blindfolded, hit in the face, mocked without striking back. Even in agony he did not resort to the same violence used against him. He is betrayed, denied by friends, scourged, stripped, nailed naked to the cross, yet he responds in pure nonviolence.

As Gene Sharp in the book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* writes, "Throughout history, under a variety of political systems people in every part of the world have waged conflict and wielded undeniable power by using a very different technique of struggle -- one which does not kill and destroy. That technique is nonviolent action. Although it has been known by a variety of names its basis has always been the same: the belief that the exercise of power depends on the consent of the ruled who by withdrawing that consent can control and even destroy the power of their opponent." This is what Jesus did in experiencing the crucifixion.. He withdrew his consent from a society of violent arrangements.

The divine response to this violence and injustice -- experienced concretely in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus -- is resurrection. The reaction of God to the unjust violence unleashed on Jesus is neither anger nor revenge but *new life which proclaims the limited jurisdiction of violence and injustice*. The Spirit of Christ is then handed over to the disciples that they might continue reconciliation and peacemaking. The divine response to violence is the gift of a spirit of patient endurance and love, and a call to the human community to make peace.

When Jesus appears to Mary at the tomb his words to her are not to be afraid -- not to be afraid of what violence can do because there is a greater peace-making power at work. This is fundamental to nonviolent resistance. Lack of fear is critical, because violence can impose its will only to the extent that it's companion, death, is feared. What Jesus teaches in his experience

of crucifixion is that the key to nonviolence is the process of overcoming death by fearless love. This fearless love is grounded in a commitment to remember who we are, that is, members of one family embraced by a most loving God.

Pinchas Lapide tells the story of a rabbi who was asked, "Who is the mightiest in the country?" The rabbi responded, "He who wins the love of his enemy." She who wins the love of her enemy. It is a great honor and challenge to be invited by the savior to join in this mighty kind of love. To love in this way means we will have to avoid cowardice as much as violence. We will have to commit to radical love for one another, act with courage to assure inclusive community and the well-being of each person, and ultimately to let resurrection be in God's hands.