



Centering Love

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

Luke 6:27-38, February 20, 2022

I used to volunteer at a nonprofit called Break the Cycle, whose mission was to help teenagers protect and free themselves from dating and domestic violence by understanding abuse and their legal rights. We taught about the predictable cycles of abuse which will continue unless you understand and have the power to interrupt them. And in general, we all know that violence and hatred perpetuate themselves. Someone is harmed, they retaliate, more loss and more retaliation occur, and on and on it goes. During the cold war, the entire arms race counted on the logic of mutually assured destruction. We relied on the assumption that we would all obliterate one another with nuclear arms if anyone pulled the first trigger to avoid nuclear holocaust, but we still made thousands of nuclear bombs. Just yesterday, a group from St. John's and two other churches gave furniture and groceries and household goods and worked together to fully furnish an apartment for a refugee family of 8 from Afghanistan, the Mirzadas, who are moving in today. Unprecedented numbers of refugees from Afghanistan and Central America and Syria are pouring through the globe today from violence that never seems to end.

And in the midst of all this, we have the teachings of Jesus from today's gospel reading. Jesus teaches about how to break the cycle of violence without becoming hateful and violent ourselves. Love your enemies, he says. And Jesus is no hypocrite. In this same gospel, just after Jesus is crucified, he says "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

But this teaching is so profoundly difficult, and also problematic. Surely we cannot allow evil free reign, to just passively accept abuse. It has been said that “the Christian ideal has not been tried and been found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”¹

There is a theologian named Walter Wink who spent years studying the military dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile, and then the apartheid regime in South Africa, seeking to understand how the evil of systems is created and perpetuated, and thus how it may be broken. Observing what was happening in South Africa, he came to believe that nonviolent resistance was the only thing that was actually working there. He was profoundly disturbed by the evil of the regimes in both places—so much so that he became physically ill, touring South and Central America and seeing what was being done to people—but he emerged on the other side in a place of hope, using these very scriptures as his foundation.

When Jesus says to turn the other cheek, Dr. Wink says, it is about forcing someone who has backhanded you—a demeaning move a superior would make to an inferior, a master to a slave—to hit you palm or fist first, like an equal. When Jesus says to give your shirt to someone who takes your cloak, it’s about exaggerating their exploitation so much that you stand naked before them, which shames them, not you. When in Matthew’s version of this scripture Jesus says to walk the second mile with a soldier who only asks you to walk one, it is to get the soldier in trouble, for only one mile is legally allowed. All these strategies of nonviolent resistance use the abuse to force a moment of choice on the abuser. I’ve preached about this before—it’s about extending what author Matt Linn calls “the two hands that heal”—one to say stop, and the other to say I see your humanity, and I invite better from you.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, quoted in “Goodreads” website, accessed February 17, 2022 at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/13211-the-christian-ideal-has-not-been-tried-and-found-wanting>.

But how do we get to the place where we can do even that? These tactics of nonviolent resistance have emerged from leaders like Martin Luther King and Gandhi who studied Jesus' teachings and used them to bring about great liberation for their people without using violence. But what about the love that is underneath these tactics? How do we get to that place?

I don't think we can start with the hardest things. We have to start with the little everyday enemies like your spouse who doesn't pay attention to your needs or your neighbor who never shovels your shared driveway. Once I was meeting with someone who was in a spiritual quandary, who was seeking pastoral care. This person felt stuck. To get unstuck they asked me to do something for them, but the request seemed inappropriate to me, and truthfully I felt a visceral gut reaction, just wanting to get away. But looking them in the face, I had this flash of awareness that their inner core, their truest self, was good. It wasn't that intellectually I thought, well they are a good person. It was that for some reason, in that moment, I could see beyond any doubt that they were made by God for goodness even if they weren't in a healthy place right then. That gave me the ability to invite goodness from them without shaming or demonizing them and also without saying yes to their request. I don't always remember the goodness in myself or others. But experiencing this was like riding a bike for the first time. My spiritual muscles remember how to do it.

You've perhaps heard something about chaos theory—that every created thing impacts every other created thing—that we are all interrelated. But just because we are all interrelated and impact one another doesn't mean we impact one another for good. We need not just to be in relationship, but in right relationship, with one another. That is what love is. The experience of sensing our profound interdependence, and then choosing to act in a way that contributes to the common good, is love.

In the visioning exercises we did at the annual meeting, I asked you what a flourishing St John's would look like to you, and what we would need to let go of and to embrace to get there. You will be hearing more over time about what you said. But among other things, three strong themes emerged. One was a yearning to connect more deeply with one another in small groups about our spiritual journeys. Another was a desire to focus on joy, the positive, the good news. And a third was a desire to really make a difference in this world—to choose a few things and go deep with them, rather than doing many things. When we choose to address systemic racism, to really do something about it. When we choose as people of faith to be good stewards of creation, to make a difference with climate change.

These three things might seem to conflict. Should we focus inward or outward? Should we fight injustice or focus on the positive? As usual, it's not either / or. In fact, the church has a unique vocation. We are not a political action committee or a secular social justice nonprofit. We have the charism and vocation of being a demonstration plot, a community practicing Jesus' third way. The writers of the New Testament, and theologian Walter Wink also, saw institutions themselves as having a kind of spiritual essence or soul, if you will. Call it corporate culture, call it the angel of the church that the author of Revelation talks about. The collection of us is greater than the sum of each one of us. This spiritual essence of St John's is I believe crystallizing and clarifying. It's about centering love. It's de-centering the illusion that we are primarily a collection of individuals coming for our personal spiritual needs, or competing for scarce resources, concerned primarily for ourselves and our family and our tribe. It's de-centering selfishness of every kind, including European culture and whiteness as normative. It's centering a commitment to the flourishing of all, by following Jesus' Way of Love together.

In case you didn't know, St. John's has a really terrific small book group on Wednesdays at noon called Spirit Group. Right now they are reading a book called the *Journey of the Universe*² which explains recent science that sees the universe not only as a place, but as a story. Get this: scientists have discovered that some galaxies, including the Milky Way, are generative because of their shape and the way energy moves through them. These galaxies have a constant rhythm of creating new stars even as old stars die. I don't even begin to understand this scientifically, but bear with me. There are other kinds of galaxies that are not generative, again because of how they are shaped and how energy moves through them; their stars die, and more stars are not being created. What is amazing is that they have discovered at least one instance of when you put a galaxy that is dying in close proximity to one that is generative, the dying galaxy revives and begins generating stars again.

The purpose of church is to be generative, to commit to the flourishing of all, to live in a different way, and like the galaxies I talked about, to get close to other individuals and institutions so that the love we experience here is contagious and catches on and spreads. If violence perpetuates itself, then let love do so more. If animosity and hatred are contagious, then let compassion and joy be even more so. Our purpose is to do all three things that you talked about in the visioning exercise: to form small groups centered in faith and spirituality in a way that changes us; to focus on the joy and positivity of our central message, which is Jesus' love, his third way; and through these things to participate in the ways God is already transforming our world.

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² Brian Swimme and Mary Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (Yale University Press, 2011) at 22-26.

Let us be a place where the negative energies of selfishness and accusation and polarization wither away and die, having nothing to feed them. Let us be a place where joy and seeing goodness and following Jesus' Way of Love happen in increasingly creative and generative ways, where each person does their small part, and the whole is greater than the sum of our parts because God's Spirit is active and leading. Let us experiment and surprise one another with just how contagious love can become. Amen.