

Matthew 5:38-38

Non-violence- Still a Holy Notion

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We believe that Jesus was both fully human **and** fully divine. All spring we explored the significance of Jesus' Jewishness. Born into a Jewish village, Jesus' disciples all called him Rabbi. Before Easter all our sermons focused on Jesus' human life as a Jew and how our own faith has its roots in Judaism. But now, after Easter our focus has shifted to the divine part of the equation. If we believe that Jesus was **both** fully human and fully divine, then what made people start to worship him? It is one thing to call Jesus Rabbi and quite another to say that he was the Son of God. Throughout April we are asking the question – Why worship Jesus?

As members of the United Church of Christ we don't believe that we should tell you to worship Jesus because we say so. As your ministers, we feel the need to explain the latest scholarship and thinking about why his disciples began to worship Jesus, and start a conversation about why we worship Jesus today. When we look at the history of the early Christian church we discover that the disciples spent about 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection sifting through stories about their master, and thinking about his character and message. They discussed and debated who he was. Before long, they were convinced that his character was so exemplary and his wisdom so profound that he must have been a special messenger from God. His "divinity" was not an external quality, but more internal. It was as though they saw integrity, compassion, and a depth of human understanding that pointed to a divine Source in Jesus.

Why do we worship Jesus? Because he lived with such deep compassion for others that through him people felt God's love. Their devotion grew because he bore such profound

forgiveness that they were in awe of his spiritual integrity. This week we will look at his peacefulness, and ability to demonstrate the power of non-violence.

The clues to Jesus divine essence shine through his everyday experiences. Jesus lived in a violent world but he embodied peace. He was not a violent man. He endured ridicule and torture himself, but his was a loving spirit. He was no doormat, but he did not use violence to show his strength. He was the genius who first demonstrated the power of non-violence. We have seen how non-violence worked in the last century when Mahatma Gandhi used it to challenge the British Empire. We have seen how non-violence worked when Martin Luther King used it to lead the Civil Rights movement in this country. But we forget that Jesus originated the notion of non-violence. Jesus demonstrated the effectiveness of using non-violence to challenge oppressive force. He was the first one to say

“You have heard it said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you Do not resist an evildoer...you have heard it said that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

His ideas were news 2000 years ago and they are news today. Let's take a look at Jesus' wisdom on non-violence. His concept of non-violence has changed the world, and it may be just the salve we need for our weary souls this week.

In the first place Jesus tells us that non-violence is the only way to defeat evil. If we want to stand up to evil the best way to do that is to disarm it with goodness. Now, that may seem counter-intuitive. Most of us have to learn non-violence. When we feel danger we are hot-wired to either fight or flee. That is why we have adrenalin. But the discovery that non-violence is our best retort to violence takes time.

The disciples had to learn it and the early Christians had to learn it. Christians were often persecuted. Their small churches were out-lawed by the Romans within 70 years of Jesus' death, and they might have easily dissipated. But they became a vibrant and resilient religious community because they were resolved to carry on in spite of the persecution they faced. They often had to worship in secret – in catacombs and caves, but they did not withdraw from society, they reached out all the more. They became known for their love and their feeding stations for the poor were their trademark. They even tried to love the Romans and show mercy to those who persecuted them. The resilient power of their non-violence proved so impressive that Christians prevailed

When Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for resisting the apartheid government in South Africa, he believed that you had to fight injustice and cruel racial oppression with violence. But in those years he spent in jail he changed, and he came to believe that the only way to fight the kind of evil he was up against was to see a higher moral power. The only way to beat apartheid was to use non-violence. While he was in jail he and other Black activists were all in jail and so it had been proven to them that violence was not effective. There, they re-evaluated and fashioned a new approach to apartheid- something that proved to be much more useful. Do not give evil for evil.

This week we learned again as we all were part of a city-wide manhunt that it takes time and restraint and discipline to apprehend a suspect, especially a violent one. It would have been easier to storm the areas, and probably hurt civilians. It would have been easier to storm the boat in the back yard where the suspect was finally apprehended on Friday night. Restraint and discipline are the hallmarks of justice and a legal system known for due process.

In the second place, the forces of violence are not winning. When we get overwhelmed by the human cost of war or the human toll of random acts of terrorism or violence like the one we saw this week- it is natural to worry that violence is escalating in our world.

But the arc of human history teaches a different lesson.

In Biblical times, especially in the Old Testament, wars typically resulted in the slaughter of the vanquished by the victors. Many Biblical passages tell of battles that ended with the annihilation of the enemies – every man woman and child. The legal code was full of violent punishments for crimes we deem misdemeanors. In the Hebrew Bible the punishment for adultery was death for the woman. The death sentence could be meted out for dis-honoring your parents, or ignoring the Sabbath. Jump ahead to the Middle Ages you see that punishments for stealing involved the loss of a hand, or worse. In those days brutal types of capital punishment became occasions for public sport. In colonial times judgment was swift and due process was crude; sentences were brutal, shaming and often disfiguring.

Canadian psychologist Steven Pinker argues in his new book, The Better Angels of our Nature that human violence has declined dramatically over the centuries. He points to a significant tipping point in the 16th century that he believes corresponds to the age of Reason and the Enlightenment. Pinker contends that the worst violence always corresponds to those times or places where there is anarchy.¹ Throughout history, over time people have placed a greater and greater value on human life.

Princeton Ethicist Peter Singer believes that evolution has produced more and more empathy in human beings. Or at least the circle of our empathy seems to be expanding. All this scholarship supports the notion that the forces of violence are not winning.

This week in Christian Century, religion professor Scott Paeth writes that there is a lot of talk about the culture of violence in our country. People point to television, movies, books and video games that promote or encourage violence. Everyone from the National Rifle Association to President Obama unites in condemning our violent culture. “But,” he says, “it is not at all clear that a ‘culture of violence’ is responsible. Violence as a social phenomenon is far too complex to be traced to a single media source. ...Statistics show that over all violence

¹ TED Talk Steven Pinker: “Surprising Decline in Violence”

has declined in the United States over the past five years. Since 2010 – just three years – violence is down 3.8 percent according to the FBI.”²

Given all that we have witnessed this week in Boston, I am not sure that this is information we can even take in, but I hold it up. What has increased in this country has been mass shootings. While our city streets and rural villages are actually getting safer all the time, the one thing that is increasing is mass shooting and terrorist acts like the one we saw on Patriots Day at the Boston Marathon in Boston. The horror of these acts and the publicity they garner can spread fear and confusion in ways that negate all the progress that has really improved our lives. So how do we follow a non-violent rabbi from Galilee today? What can we learn from his example that will help us navigate these hard times?

Finally, Jesus came to remind us that love is at our core. A lot of churches will tell you that sin is at the center of your being. But Jesus did not actually say that, himself. I believe that he came to show us that **love is the mark of God’s imprint on us. Love will prove our greatest asset in life, for it is strong enough to stand up to evil.** I think we have all been reminded of the power of human compassion this week in the wake of the explosions at the Boston Marathon on Monday. We saw selfless compassion when people on Boylston St. ignored their own safety and went to help others. We saw love for strangers when men tore the shirts off their backs to stem the bleeding of people they just met. We saw love and decency when doctors and nurses took extra shifts, endured many long nights in surgery, volunteered to work when they were not on duty. All across this metropolitan area people responded with generosity and open hearts.

People opened their homes to strangers, and risked their own safety to go the extra mile for those in need. Boston has been awash in an out-pouring of goodwill. Men and women

² “What Culture of violence?” by Scott Paeth [Christian Century](#) April 17, 2013. P. 11

shared their humanity in new ways. Friday was a massive effort of cooperation where millions of people cooperated to ensure safety and justice would prevail.

It is that human connection where we affirm the holiness in one another that will be our best wisdom in the days ahead. Terrorist attacks are the work of cowards. They have the power to intimidate, but only if we let them. Terror wins if we grow isolated. Terror wins if we turn away from our neighbors. Terror wins if we are frightened to be in our city. Terror wins if we lose hope.

Jesus tells us that in rising above evil and praying even for those who do evil things, we dig deep into our own souls and claim that place where we are God's own. In those moments of rendering we rise above the evil we know and claim our place as God's children.

Let us pray...

"Hope means to keep living

Amid desperation

And to keep humming

In the darkness.

Hoping is knowing that there is love,

It is falling asleep and waking again

When the sun rises.

In the midst of a gale at sea,

It is to discover land.

In the eyes of one another

It is to see that he understands you.

As long as there is still hope

There will also be prayer.

And God will be holding you

In his hands."