

“Nonviolence or Nonexistence”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
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7th Sun. after Epiphany
Seminary/Church Vocation Sun.

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18

Matthew 5:38-48

[*Jesus said,*]

‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...’ Matt. 5:44b

Let us pray... O God,

Teach us to work together and boldly proclaim our witness
as individuals and as a church.

Amen

This morning, my topic is “Nonviolence or Nonexistence” –

which touches on Charles McCollough’s message last week.

Charles used Jesus’ teaching about ‘nonviolence’ from the Sermon on the Plain
as it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

Today’s lesson comes from Matthew and includes the same teaching
as it is found in the Sermon on the Mount.

It just so happens that this is the assigned lectionary reading for today.

How about that for a coincidence – or congruence?

I’m not going to focus on this teaching –

other than to say to say it is Jesus’ proactive strategy for a ‘Third Way’
in responding to personal abuse or social oppression.

By the way, someone told me that –

after listening to Charles’ presentations last week,
they found it refreshing that Jesus could be a little snarky!

Snarky is not how I would describe Cal Robertson –

who nevertheless, is one of the most Christ-like people I know.

He is pictured on our bulletin cover today, standing on a street corner
holding a sign, a silent witness for peace.

When I knew him in Mystic, CT, he used to have two signs on display:

“Nonviolence or Nonexistence – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” and

“Will there be a future for our children?”

He would split his time for weekly vigils,

between that corner off Route One in Mystic and
the Civil War Monument in New London, CT.

Cal is a Vietnam vet – a combat medic, who came home troubled by the war
like so many and after many years of alcohol addiction, he had a stroke,
which left him with difficulty in speaking and mobility.

Willard, p.2

I first heard about Cal around Thanksgiving time 1997
at our ecumenical clergy Bible study, when his pastor
from the American Baptist Church in Niantic
told us all that Cal had been hit by a truck while picking up
some broken glass out of the road.

He went to the hospital with a broken leg;
and when his pastor went to visit him, he asked Cal if there was anything
he could do for him;

Cal said,

“Would you hold my signs on the street corner?”

I remember we all chuckled at this,
but then our clergy Bible study got serious to organize and do just that –
with everybody taking one afternoon, each week through Christmas,
to stand in the cold for two hours just as Cal had been doing.

“Nonviolence or Nonexistence – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” and

“Will there be a future for our children?”

I was so moved by the commitment and determination of this man –
an Army medic whose soul had been wounded by the war,
that I did it for another three months on my own.

There was a poem he would pass out to people on strips of paper, called,
“An Important Lesson” by George Mizo, and it reads:

*You, my parents, taught me that it was wrong to kill. . .
except in war.*

*You, my church, taught me that it was wrong to kill. . .
except in war.*

*You, my teachers, taught me that it was wrong to kill. . .
except in war.*

*You, my government, taught me that it was wrong to kill. . .
except in war.*

Then you sent me to war

And when I had no choice . . . except to kill,

Then you told me I was wrong!

And now I will tell you. . .

my parents,. . . my church,. . . my teachers, . . . my government,

It is not wrong to kill. . . except in war.

It is wrong to kill period!

And this you have to learn . . . Just as I had to!

<http://veteransforpeaceactions.blogspot.com/2007/05/gathering-of-vfp-patriots-in-new-london.html>

Willard, p.3

At what point do we get involved in the big questions of our time?

When do we become radicalized?

I am a Progressive Christian – there’s just no two ways around it
and that was confirmed for me last week at our Festival of Art & Spirit,
fusing art and faith as creative responses
to the challenges of life and the graceful gifts of God,
and by what I have been reading in the books of
Walter Wink and Charles McCollough.

I don’t know if that “Progressive” label applies to all of our church members,
because some of us are very traditional – even conservative.

For example:

Not all our gay members agree about legalizing gay marriage.

But this much is true about who we are:

We are Christian; We are Open & Affirming of people;

We are a ‘Progressive voice’ in The Villages and our wider community.

Keeping civil discourse, ‘civil’ about the issues of our day, can be difficult –
especially around election time, even with informal conversations
with family & friends, in our neighborhoods and on the Internet.

Sometimes, there is no civil discourse and even a breakdown of communication.

“Nonviolence or Nonexistence – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” and

“Will there be a future for our children?”

Something remarkable occurred this week,

when I got a phone call from Phyllis Kalter at Temple Shalom.

She asked me if I would do the invocation next Sunday

for the Todah Menorah Memorial commemoration, which will thank
the WWII liberators of the Jews held in Nazi concentration camps.

The memorial itself is a set of 9 sculptured helmets, rifles, and combat boots,
arranged as candle holders for an immense menorah,

with a fractured Star of David above, held together by three hands
representing American, English, and Russian soldiers.

I agreed and then received a call from one of the event’s co-coordinators,

Gene Sweeney, who is an Irish Catholic and a Vietnam veteran.

I asked him about his passion for this project –

and it soon became clear that he was coming from a very politically
conservative perspective with a strong commitment to the military.

He was especially concerned about how our young people are not being taught
enough about the events of 9-11 and

that there is a continuing threat from Islamic extremism.

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We talked for a long time and I could hear frustration and fear in his voice,
which I responded to by giving him a different perspective from his own –
to which he was willing to listen.

I acknowledged that we were coming from differing views
and at one point I asked him if he knew anything about
the United Church of Christ.

He said, ‘No’, and then I told him we are the church of the Pilgrims and...
we are the first church to ordain women in modern times,
the first to ordain African-Americans,
and-the first-to-ordain-gay-people...

I also said to him that one thing in particular that gives me hope these days,
is that – from our American culture, inspired by Judeo-Christian traditions,
women’s rights has emerged to slowly, but surely change the world.
I mentioned Malala Yousafzai as perhaps the hopeful example for a better world
that has so far, come out of the terrible period of war in the Middle East –
and that she is the Taliban’s worst nightmare
and will be around for a long time to come.

Malala Yousafzai – she is that remarkable Pakistani Muslim teenager
who said she would even forgive the Taliban man who shot her,
and isn’t she then, a personification of Jesus’ ‘Third Way’ and
a hopeful option towards answering Cal Robertson’s challenge:
“Nonviolence or Nonexistence – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” and
“Will there be a future for our children?”

At the end of our conversation,

Mr. Sweeney not only re-affirmed the offer for me to do the invocation
at the Todah Menorah Memorial event next Sunday,
but he even invited me to say more.

Conservative, liberal, progressive, traditional –
if we cherry-picked the best ideas each point of view has to offer,
doesn’t it seem reasonable we could solve any problem.

Otherwise, if we remain divided over how to respond to Cal Robertson’s challenge,
there will be no acceptable answer for anyone.

“Nonviolence or Nonexistence – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” and
“Will there be a future for our children?”

We know the answer that is possible.

Amen

*Our first lesson today is from Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18
in which God instructs Moses about various laws
that link holiness with justice...*

[1] And the LORD said to Moses,

[2] "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel,
You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy.

[9] When you harvest your grain,
always leave some of it standing along the edges of your fields
and don't pick up what falls on the ground.

[10] Don't strip your grapevines clean
or gather the grapes that fall off the vines.

Leave them for the poor and for those foreigners who live among you.
I am the Lord your God.

[11] Do not steal or tell lies
or cheat others.

[12] Do not misuse my name by making promises you don't intend to keep.
I am the Lord your God.

[13] Do not steal anything or cheat anyone,
and don't fail to pay your workers at the end of each day.

[14] I am the Lord your God,
and I command you not to make fun of the deaf
or to cause a blind person to stumble.

[15] Be fair, no matter who is on trial—
don't favor either the poor or the rich.

[16] Don't be a gossip, but never hesitate to speak up in court,
especially if your testimony can save someone's life.

[17] Don't hold grudges.
On the other hand, it's wrong not to correct someone who needs correcting.

[18] Stop being angry and don't try to take revenge.
I am the Lord,

and I command you to love others as much as you love yourself.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 5:38-48

[38] "You have heard that it was said,

`An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

[39] But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil.

But if any one strikes you on the right cheek,
turn to him the other also;

[40] and if any one would sue you and take your coat,
let him have your cloak as well;

[41] and if any one forces you to go one mile,
go with him two miles.

[42] Give to him who begs from you,
and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

[43] "You have heard that it was said,

`You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

[44] But I say to you,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

[45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven;
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

[46] For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

[47] And if you salute only your brethren,
what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

[48] You, therefore, must be perfect,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Inspired by Matthew 5:38-42

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
DON’T HIT YOUR ABUSER BACK – WITH VIOLENCE...
IF SOMEONE BACKHANDS THE RIGHT SIDE OF YOUR FACE,
TURN SO THEY’D HAVE TO STRIKE THE LEFT SIDE –
AND RISK BEING GUILTY OF ASSAULT.

AND IF SOMEONE SUES YOU
FOR THE SHIRT OFF YOUR BACK,
EMBARRASS THEM WITH YOUR NAKEDNESS
BY OFFERING YOUR CLOAK, TOO.

AND IF A ROMAN SOLDIER FORCES YOU
TO CARRY HIS PACK FOR A MILE –
GO TWO MILES AND MAKE A FRIEND.

ANYTIME SOMEONE ASKS YOU
TO GIVE THEM SOMETHING,
OR TO BORROW SOMETHING,
DON’T TURN YOUR BACK ON THEM.

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR’ AND
‘THOU SHALT HATE THINE ENEMY.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU, LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND
PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU,
SO THAT YOU MAY BECOME
CHILDREN OF YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN.
FOR GOD HAS MADE
THE SUN TO SHINE UPON THE EVIL AND THE GOOD;
THE RAIN TO FALL UPON THE JUST AND THE UNJUST.

SO, IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU,
ISN’T THAT ITS OWN REWARD?
EVEN THIEVES AND TRAITORS DO THIS.
AND IF YOU ONLY WELCOME THOSE WHO ARE LIKE YOU
WHAT WOULD BE NOBLE ABOUT THAT?
YET, ISN’T THIS WHAT THE EXTREMISTS DO?
INSTEAD, PERFECT YOURSELF IN THIS WAY –
BY PRACTICING GOD’S PERFECT WAY
OF LOVING-KINDNESS.

