

**Sermon: The 3rd Way of One Jew in Palestine****Scripture:****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 6, 2024**

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About 15 years ago this month, I did a 10 day trip with the Christian Peacemaker Teams to Palestine. We went to the West Bank - Hebron and Bethlehem and other areas of the occupied territories to learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We met with peacemakers on both sides, Jews who were working for an end to the violence and the occupation and Muslim and Christian Palestinians who were doing the same. It was a different kind of trip to the Holy Lands, not about following the steps of Jesus per se, imagining what it was like in biblical times, but witnessing the situation now - walking alongside the massive concrete separation wall, waiting in line to get through checkpoints from one street to another in Hebron, walking through settlements green and verdant with grass and flower beds in the the desert landscape because water is diverted from Palestinian lands, working to pick olives from a farmer's land half of which had been confiscated to build more settlement homes. It all was quite a glimpse into the heart of the holy land of Jesus in all its pain, pain that is as present now as it ever was, no more present now than it always has been, for Jews, for Palestinians.

I was in 2 different group conversations this summer within weeks of each other, one where it was said - this is where the line is drawn, you cannot be a moral person and accept what Israel is doing to Gaza. And in the other conversation - this is where I draw the line, if you can't see why Israel has to eliminate Hamas after the monstrous violence they did to

women and children, even at the cost of all those lives, then there's a problem. Both progressive justice-seeking people, one understanding the violence of Hamas against Israel because of the oppressive occupation and the other understanding Israeli military violence against Palestinians because of the level of violence Hamas leveled against them, a violence they always fear.

We cannot know, here in our relatively safe and comfortable American communities, what the Palestinians are suffering and have suffered over the decades that brought them to such violence. And we cannot know what the Jewish people suffer and have suffered over the decades that brings them to such violence. And we don't hear much if any thing at all about Palestinians who are seeking a different, better and nonviolent way towards liberation, but they are there. We met them and they are remarkable people. And we do not hear very often of the Jewish Israelis who are seeking a different and better, nonviolent way, to live with their neighbors, but they are there as well. We met them and they are remarkable people.

But one thing we can watch and witness from a distance is how in this world violence begets violence or as Martin Luther King Jr said - "Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars." And that's what we are witnessing over there as a new generation grows up under the veil of violence and hatred.

But as it is now, so it was then when Jesus walked that land, a Jewish man living under the occupation of Rome who in the midst of it came to show a different way, a third way between violence against the

enemy on the one hand and acquiescing to evil on the other. 2000 years ago Jesus grew up with Rome as the occupying power, a power that kept its control over the populace with a death grip that was brutal and violent if you crossed it - think not just of Jesus' crucifixion but roads lined with crucified people slowly dying, as an example of what would be done to those who spoke or acted against the empire. That being just one particularly gruesome example of the way Rome had a stranglehold on the Jews of Palestine to contain and control them. As in all such situations of occupation and oppression, there were Jews who were acquiescing to the power and violence of Rome, eking out an existence, keeping their heads down, with little hope, many of them, going along to get along. There were other Jews who collaborated with the empire and got what they could for themselves and their own - in the New Testament those were the tax collectors and Sadducees, the High Priests, for example. And there were some Jews who took up arms in revolt, known as Zealots. Any of these approaches were what Rome was banking on - giving in and being compliant citizens of the state or go ahead and revolt, and we will crush you as an example to others... or hang you on a cross.

This was the setting that Jesus was born and raised in. To say that Jesus was not political is to misunderstand what he did because while he did not foment rebellion against the evil of Rome He also didn't meekly acquiesce to them to avoid rocking the boat. Jesus' politics were clear and powerful and offered a third way... which at the time was not appreciated by most people and for that matter even today it's hardly appreciated by even the most vocally devout Christians. For his way was not the way of power for control-sake to determine certain outcomes but love for love's sake to increase the possibility of Love's outcomes.

Now you can't say that Jesus' third way was the way of love without being really clear that Jesus' love ethic was not a limp warm fuzzy thing - "oh come on you all, let's just love one another" while Rome is nailing people to crosses. It might be better to use Mahatma Gandhi's phrase to describe Jesus' approach and that was "Satyagraha", a sanskrit word that can be translated as Love Force or Truth Force. There is NO doubt that Jesus' third way of Love required confrontation with evil. Jesus was not shy about that, especially evil in the guise of the hypocrisy of people in power, serving themselves the expense of others. He never hesitated to confront evil when he saw it even as he made many enemies as a result.

But he cut his third way, the way of the Love Force by confronting injustice and evil and by refusing to use violence against his enemy. He refused to respond to the hate coming at him with hate in return. He had enough of a following, enough people gathering around him, admiring him, hanging on his word that if he had wanted to rally a violent revolt he could have done that, to greater effect than most who led revolts at the time. But instead he organized a revolution not against Rome but to confront the tyrannies of the human heart which has a tendency to create enemies and protect itself and its own at all costs all the while believing its own righteousness and the unrighteousness of the other.

So Jesus' third way was the way of nonviolence that required stepping away from the usual dynamics and fields of play, the pseudo-events that everyone was up in arms about, and staying focused on the field of the human soul which is the special arena of God, not separate from real human events, just clearer about them, what's important and what is not, what's essential and what is not, what's the path forward and what's not. The arena of the soul where the dignity of the human being is

sacrosanct, not to be bought or sold or oppressed or used and abused but that is rooted in love and built on prayer and founded in the soil of the Spirit. And in the arena of the soul, the common good is what is premium and the honoring of other souls is sacrosanct, friend or enemy, and truth is not something that serves one's own ends, to be discarded if it doesn't serve us, but rather Truth is what everything must be depending on and relied upon. Hear the words again of that Hindu admirer of Jesus - Mahatma Gandhi:

“Truth alone will endure, all the rest will be swept away before the tide of time. I must continue to bear testimony to truth even if I am forsaken by all. Mine may today be a voice in the wilderness, but it will be heard when all other voices are silenced, if it is the voice of Truth.”

And the Truth is as Martin Luther King says: “that darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” How is it that we followers of Jesus, so many Christians, too many Christians, are unwilling to take seriously Jesus' Love Ethic, his Love Force as a mandate for how we live? For sure, there are Christians who do and have done so over the course of history but I'm not sure there's been enough of us given where we find ourselves. Like that famous GK Chesterton's statement - “Christianity is a great idea. It's ashame it's hardly been tried.” What's hardly been tried is the way of self-sacrificial love, the power and strength of that, to love the enemy in a way that doesn't permit evil and lies but doesn't scapegoat the other as the entire problem and ourselves as the only bearers of truth.

We can look over at the nightmare of Gaza and Israel and now Lebanon and shake our heads in despair built we are a part of it, literally our tax dollars funneled into weapons. And our country flirts dangerously

with relativising and dismissing the importance of Truth and honesty. We are practicing the violence of scapegoating others, be they immigrants made out to be the enemy or white working class men. We have this insane obsession with guns regardless of what they do to our neighborhoods and our children. We too ignore Jesus' third way when we cannot get off that interminable and destructive merry-go-round of us against them, of violence begetting violence, of might makes right, of pronouncements and postures that are not accompanied by a willingness to sacrifice some of what we have and what makes our lives comfortable.

And so we could begin by learning something of the practice of the Love Force. Learning the basics and practicing is a good way to start, never knowing how we are going to need to lean into Jesus' third way in the weeks, months, and years to come. The series we are hosting beginning tomorrow night is called Disagreeing Well and it is a 3-night educational process in understanding our human propensities to fight or flight and how to choose a way in conflict that honors the other and seeks the Truth with them. It is a practice in Jesus' 3rd way. There is still space for you to join so we hope you'll consider doing so.

But I'd like us to end with a prayer that Maeve will pray for us. Our Jewish siblings are in the midst of their High Holy Days, beginning with Rosh Hashana and ending next week with Yom Kippur. This closing prayer is from a famous Rabbi from the 18th century known as Rabbi Nachman, from Ukraine and it is a prayer that the knowledge of God will come to us such that we might one day erase violence from the world...

May it be Your will,  
Holy One, our God, our ancestors' God,  
that you erase war and bloodshed from the world  
and in its place draw down  
a great and glorious peace  
so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation  
neither shall they learn war any more.  
Rather, may all the inhabitants of the earth  
recognize and deeply know  
this great truth:  
that we have not come into this world  
for strife and division  
nor for hatred and rage,  
nor provocation and bloodshed.  
We have come here only  
to encounter You,  
eternally blessed One.  
And so,  
we ask your compassion upon us;  
raise up, by us, what is written:  
*I shall place peace upon the earth  
and you shall lie down safe and undisturbed  
and I shall banish evil beasts from the earth  
and the sword shall not pass through your land.  
but let justice come in waves like water  
and righteousness flow like a river,  
for the earth shall be full  
of the knowledge of the Holy One  
as the waters cover the sea.*  
So may it be.

And we say: Amen.