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“I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil” (Matt 5:39).

1 Kgs 21:1-16; Matt 5:38-42

There is a principle in martial arts that says to move in the direction of a blow will exhaust your opponent. Fighting back increases the fury of the attack. Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence is often ridiculed as naïve, but Gandhi discovered how effective passive resistance was in turning Britain’s use of force into failure in India. The same lesson is now evident in the streets where the use of force against peaceful protestors has only strengthened their challenge to official violence.

The Lectionary first gives us the murder of Naboth by Jezebel and Ahab as a crime that calls out to heaven for vengeance. But the Gospel answers that even evil like this is best deterred by nonviolent means. To take a blow shames the aggressor; to be treated unjustly exposes injustice; to go the extra mile awakens the conscience of an oppressor; to be generous to a fault turns material loss into moral gain.

Evil eventually destroys itself. Virtue brings honor and helps us to let go and move beyond hurt. To forgive an enemy opens the way to making a friend. Mercy heals what vengeance recycles into endless conflict and division. These are hard sayings that make little sense to victims eager to strike back. They are ideals that falter unless we take them to heart by disarming the violence within us by the grace of unconditional love only God can give.

Jesus turned the ancient rules of engagement upside down. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth sounds fair, but, as Gandhi observed, it will only make the world blind and toothless. Nonviolent resistance to evil would be merely an ideal if Jesus had not lived it, taking death with him to the cross and defeating it with love. The greatest threat to peace in our world is the idea that overwhelming force will bring peace, that more guns will halt gun violence, that murdering murderers will deter murder.

Each generation has a chance to get it right by teaching its children the art of forgiveness, reason, fairness and empathy as the first and best way to solve conflict. Systemic change happens when citizens elect leaders who seek justice as the path to peace instead of using force to win instead of wisdom to achieve the common good. Social harmony thrives where collaboration replaces competition and potential is recognized over privilege and service is praised over self-interest.

The Gospel is not a spiritual road map to heaven but a living plan to transform the earth into the garden God created it to be. Jesus lived and died to show us the wisdom of moving together toward the Beloved Community instead of cycling back for another round of self-destruction and chaos by repeating history's mistakes. The Holy Spirit hovers over the world promising a New Creation when we are ready to welcome the future we say we have always wanted.

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