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What's so unusual about that? (The Sermon on the Mount, Part 2)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"If you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what's so unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?"
(Matthew 5:46-48)

These questions from the Sermon on the Mount get right to the heart of the spiritual life. Why don't we love everyone everywhere unconditionally? Why not love our enemies, as Jesus said? Why go along with the culture of war and its arrogant, ignorant warmakers? Why not practice "agape" like Jesus and his greatest followers, saints like Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Dr. King, Ita Ford and the Berrigans?

Jesus is adamant. He wants us to practice universal, unconditional, sacrificial, all-inclusive, nonviolent love, in his words, "unusual love." Be like God, he tells us; love everyone on the whole planet. He exceeds the ancient biblical commandment, "Thou shall not kill." He even surpasses Isaiah's call to "beat swords into plowshares." He leads us beyond anger, despair, greed, fear, anxiety, selfishness, violence, murder, and war, to God's own universal, compassionate love.

With these challenges, Jesus throws down the gauntlet and compares our limited love to tax collectors and pagans. Tax collectors did the dirty work of the Roman empire by robbing the impoverished masses and

collaborating with military domination. They profited from the sufferings of the poor. Pagans, in those days, were the heathen Romans themselves. This comparison must have shocked and horrified his audience. He calls us not to be like them, not to hurt anyone, not to live off the sufferings of the poor, and not to limit ourselves to the narrow expectations of our culture.

He's trying to push us beyond our limits, to the heights of divine love, the highest ideal, the fullest potential of our humanity. He can't understand our narrow, selfish love. "Why don't you want to love everyone?" he asks in amazement. "Why are you so afraid to love universally? What have you got to lose? Why go along with everyone else's low standards? Why practice the usual selfishness and cultural blindness of the empire? Why not aim higher, to the universal love of God?"

I think Jesus presumes we are trying to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our parents, children, relatives, friends and colleagues. But he wants us to love those around the world, especially those marginalized, disenfranchised and targeted by our nation, by the empire. He expects his followers to show active, creative love to the marginalized, the excluded, the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the immigrant, the imprisoned, the unborn, the condemned, the sick, the elderly, the dying, and the enemy. He's looking for something new and unusual, ultimately the love that nonviolently lays down one's life for those in need.

This call to practice a love that transcends boundaries has always haunted, challenged and energized me. Even if few practice such love, even if most priests deny such universal love, the gauntlet remains right there in the Sermon on the Mount. I think it means traveling to places we normally would not go -- soup kitchens, homeless shelters, prisons, death rows, refugee camps, hospitals, war zones -- and there, to befriend, love and serve everyone in need. I think it means living with a heart as wide as the world. Jesus certainly demonstrates such extraordinary love by serving the poor and marginalized, breaking through his culture, resisting injustice and laying down his life nonviolently for a new world of love.

"Be perfect just as your heavenly God is perfect," he commands us (in Matthew's version). "Be compassionate as your heavenly God is compassionate" (we read in Luke's.)

Matthew's Greek word, *teleios*, is only used here and in 19:21 ("If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me.") He speaks of striving for the goal of ultimate nonviolent love. Jesus is talking about reaching our divine potential. Surpassing our broken humanity and practicing perfect compassion, nonviolence, forgiveness and love. He must believe we can do this, otherwise, I don't think he would have said it.

This call is well worth pondering every day. It invites us to examine how well we love others and our enemies, how well we show compassion, how wide we might permit our hearts to grow. What is more beautiful than a life spent offering unconditional, compassionate love toward every living being on the planet? What could be more fulfilling, rewarding, or holy?

Life is precious. We have only so much time here on earth. I hope more and more of us can begin anew to try to practice this unusual, universal love, this perfect compassion. I think it's our vocation, the reason we were created: to love Christ in every human being, especially in the poor and in the enemy. If we dare

practice this unusual, universal love, I think we will enter the paschal mystery of nonviolence, the divine mystery of Love, and be filled with light, hope, and peace. In the process, we will help disarm the world.

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To read the first part of Dear's reflection on the Sermon on the Mount, see: Love your enemies: Beginning a reflection on the Sermon on the Mount.

John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," (Doubleday) is available from your local bookstore or www.amazon.com, and the new DVD about him, "The Narrow Path," is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. His antiwar trial has been postponed until Sept. 6. The annual Los Alamos protest will be held on Aug. 3-4. Next week, John begins a speaking tour of England and Scotland. For information, see: www.johndear.org

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