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The road that leads to life (The Sermon on the Mount, 5th and last part)

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"Enter through the narrow gate," Jesus says at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. "For the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few." (Mt. 7:13-14) Gandhi summed up this verse this way: "There is no hope for the aching world except through the narrow and straight path of nonviolence."

I'm convinced that Gandhi -- and Jesus -- are right. In a world with 35 wars, widespread global warming, extreme poverty, regular executions, torture, human rights abuses, the U.S. empire, and nuclear weapons, many walk the broad road to violence, death and destruction. These days it feels like a mad rush-hour traffic jam -- toward violence, death and destruction. Going against this rush-hour traffic is hard, and alas, just as Jesus predicted, few make the attempt.

Gandhi's hermeneutic of nonviolence helps. The wide gate and broad road are the way of violence, from interpersonal violence and state violence, to bombing Iraq and building nuclear weapons; that road always leads to death and destruction. In a time of war and empire, few find the way of nonviolence, the life path which non-cooperates with violence and leads to life and peace. How sad that so many waste their lives in the mad rush to war and destruction. Jesus must weep over us.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the reign of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my God in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your

name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you evildoers.'" (Mt. 7:21-23)

Jesus wants us to enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow path of nonviolence to life, even if everyone around us supports war, greed, imperial domination, disregard for creation, and God. He wants us to enter God's reign of justice, love and peace. Even more, he wants to know us personally as friends. He seeks disciples, companions and friends to join him on his journey of active nonviolence, boundless compassion, universal love and perfect peace. Which means, he forbids us from doing evil. He wants us to do the will of the God of love and peace, and so to be people of love and peace, even if every one else has gone mad with violence and greed.

Apparently, Jesus could foresee that people would use him, even do great things in his name, all the while supporting the empire's violence and domination. Though they think they do good -- prophesying, driving out demons and doing mighty deeds in his name -- as far as Jesus is concerned, if they support the empire's violence and injustice, if they do evil, they forfeit his nonviolent company.

The importance of being known by the nonviolent Jesus! He wants to live in relationship with us. He calls us to practice his teachings of nonviolence, and so to root our lives in him through prayer and action. Just as he lives and dies in relationship with his beloved God as he walks the narrow path, he wants us to live in intimate relationship with him, dwell in his peace, and follow in his footsteps, and so, to do God's will, to do good, avoid evil, make peace, resist war, practice nonviolence and disarm the world's violence.

While studying the collected writings of Mahatma Gandhi for my Orbis book, *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writings*, I was surprised to discover that the one Bible verse he quoted most throughout his life was this verse, the very conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. From his earliest days in London and South Africa, Gandhi was besieged by born-again Christians begging him to be baptized. But he was appalled by the behavior of most Christians. "I like your Christ, but not your Christians," he wrote a friend. "They are so unlike your Christ."

For over 50 years, in scores of letters, he quoted these verses to Christian friends. "Why do Christians go about saying 'Lord, Lord,' but not do the will of Jesus?" he asked many times. "Why don't they obey the Sermon on the Mount, reject war, practice nonviolence and love their enemies? Isn't that what Jesus wants, more than the false adulation of 'Lord, Lord?'"

Gandhi would make the same critique of us. Many Christians support the Bush Administration, its war on Iraq, torture at Guantanamo, the occupation of Palestine, the development of nuclear weapons, the ongoing starvation of millions, and so forth. Every one of us has to renounce violence, war and evil doing, practice the will of the God of peace, and seek to live in relationship with the nonviolent Jesus. In other words, we have to get off the main highway to death and seek out and walk the narrow road to life.

The Gospels insist that Jesus is gentle and humble of heart, that there is nothing to fear, that we might as well step out against the onrush of the crowd and follow that narrow path of Gospel nonviolence with him. In his concluding parable, he says:

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"Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise person who built her house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined." (Mt. 7:24-27)

These are the last words of the Sermon on the Mount, so I consider this one of the most significant of all the Gospel's parables. Notice that he does not say, "Whoever acts on these words will not suffer the rain, floods or winds." In both cases, people are hit by a disastrous storm. The rains will fall, the floods will come, the winds will blow, and every one's house will be shaken. This is going to happen to us all. The question is whether or not we will be able to withstand the world's violent, destructive storms. The only way to survive these stormy times is by practicing the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

The difference between the two people in the parable is that the first one hears the word of God and acts on it. The second hears the word, but does not act. Hearing and acting vs. and hearing and not acting. Everyone hears God's words, Jesus says. Deep in our hearts, everyone knows God wants love, compassion, forgiveness, service, justice, disarmament, prayer and peace. The key is whether or not we are going to make these our daily practice, to enact God's word, to make the Sermon on the Mount come true, as Jesus did.

I hope that in these disastrous times we will begin anew to live out the Sermon on the Mount, build our lives on the solid rock of Gospel nonviolence, and hang on to the nonviolent Jesus for dear life. Then each of us -- personally, nationally, globally and as a church -- will do more than survive. We will live in peace and joy with God and one another.

John Dear's new book, 'Transfiguration,' (Doubleday) is available from your local bookstore or online, and the new DVD about him, 'The Narrow Path,' is available from www.sandamianofoundation.org. He will participate in the annual 'Sackcloth and Ashes' nonviolent action at Los Alamos, N.M., Aug. 3-4 (see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org), and stand trial for his antiwar protest on Sept. 6. Currently, he is on a speaking tour of England and Scotland. For information, see: www.johndear.org.

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