

Washing Feet

John Dear | Mar. 23, 2010 On the Road to Peace

When the demagogue Glenn Beck urged Christians recently to quit any church that used the words "social justice" or "economic justice," he betrayed the depth of our cultural darkness. But poor Glenn Beck cannot even imagine the church's true political calling to be a disarmament movement, a revolutionary community of active nonviolence in resistance to war and empire.

An article in last month's *New York Times* exposed the profound misunderstanding between our culture of war (which employs spokespersons like Beck) and the Gospel of peace. Trijicon, a Michigan arms maker doing brisk business with the Pentagon, has for the last 15 years inscribed biblical citations on their rifle sights. A common one, John 8:12, refers to the verse: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." That verse has been etched into thousands of weapons used to kill our Iraqi sisters and brothers.

We've entered new realms of absurdity when, from 50 yards out, soldiers fix the enemy in their crosshairs and squeeze the trigger -- this for the sake of the nonviolent Jesus, light of the world.

I can't help but mourn sometimes about how far we are from grasping the Gospel's call to nonviolence. Among the media and government, even priests and the laity -- few understand. The church, I submit, is called to be the community that loves enemies, speaks against war, makes peace, and takes up the cross of nonviolent resistance to systemic injustice and empire.

Wherever I go to lecture on Gospel nonviolence, debates start up, but so do new insights. In Lexington, Kentucky two weeks ago, someone approached me with an interesting observation. "Jesus' nonviolence saved the church," he said. As far as Herod and Pilate were concerned, Jesus posed no threat to the imperial system. If Jesus had been a violent revolutionary, like the Zealots, then Pilate might have taken him more seriously from the start, and arrested everyone in the Jesus movement. But Jesus' ragtag community was not worth pursuing. An odd lot, to be sure, but by and large, innocuous. Their nonviolence was no threat to the Roman empire, so the authorities didn't arrest anyone else. Only after pressure from the religious authorities and the crowds did Pilate even consent to kill the nonviolent Jesus.

His comment set me thinking, and eventually, I disagreed. Pilate was determined to crush Jesus and the community from the get-go, I submit. Why? Because Judas showed up with scores of Roman soldiers, and the only one with the authority to order them to make the arrest was Pilate himself.

Such reflections, even debates, on the nonviolence of Jesus are necessary if our faith is to deepen, and our church is to fulfill its social justice and peacemaking mission. Holy Week is an excellent time to ponder what the nonviolence of Jesus means for us today. So I invite you this Holy Week to make that journey of nonviolence with Jesus, to note what his nonviolence stirs in you, how you can move from violence deeper into nonviolence, and how we might become once again that peacemaking church which hungers for social and economic justice and resists war and empire.

Read the stories. Next week, for instance, you'll accompany Jesus entering Jerusalem on his donkey -- a piece of street theater to mock the pomp and panache of sovereigns on their war horses and their colorful military entourage. Enter the Temple with him in a spirit of truth and love as he turns over the tables of the money-changers in his nonviolent civil disobedience. Ponder those stunning un-American words, "My body broken for you, my blood shed for you." Hear his Gethsemani commandment: "Put down your sword."

And toward Good Friday stand with Jesus as he stands trial -- a story, as John the Evangelist frames it, in which it is the world, not Jesus, who comes under condemnation. "If my kingdom were of this world, my attendants would use violence to protect me. But my kingdom is not of this world." Put in contemporary terms, the Kingdom of God refuses to rely on rifles, (no matter how holy their verses). It is a kingdom of nonviolence, a kingdom of light, a kingdom of life (John 8:12).

And on Holy Thursday listen to John's last-supper discourse (John 13-17). John uniquely and deliberately frames Jesus' long discourse and passion of nonviolence as a narrative that we must enter, as a lineage that we must join, if we wish to be Jesus' disciples and share "the fullness of life." It is because we have so thoroughly misunderstood, even ignored, these teachings that the church now justifies war without blinking, scandalizes the faithful, even supports the bombing of children.

It all starts with the famous episode of the washing of the feet (John 13:1-21). This crucial story, contrary to popular opinion, is *not* a call to service, but a summons to enter into the holy lineage of nonviolence, agape, martyrdom and resurrection. It is a call to let the Christian community prepare us to walk the road of nonviolence all the way to the cross and resurrection into God's reign of peace and life. And it is a call to prepare others to undertake this costly Way of nonviolence.

Let me explain. In chapter twelve, Mary of Bethany washes Jesus' feet. Really, she's anointing him, preparing him for his impending death. She seems to be the only person who encourages Jesus on his journey of nonviolence to the cross. Jesus is consoled and fortified for the horrors that await him. Apparently, he decided that just as she washed his feet, and so prepared him for martyrdom and death, he would wash his disciples' feet, and so prepare them for the journey of nonviolence into martyrdom and resurrection. So he instructs them to anoint one another saying that anyone who follows him must be prepared and anointed for the journey of nonviolence, for the Way of the cross and resurrection, for the consequences of our resistance to injustice and empire.

The story is not about selfless service; it's about preparing one another for martyrdom, for carrying the cross of resistance to empire, for facing nonviolently the empire's persecution, punishment, prison and execution.

This political reading of John's story may sound far-fetched, so I recommend my favorite commentary on John's Gospel, *Becoming Children of God*, by scripture scholar Wes Howard Brook (Orbis, 1994). As Howard Brook explains, the clues lie in the verbs. "He rose from the supper and laid down his outer garments and took up a towel and girded himself," we read in 13:4. In the original Greek, each verb is loaded with paschal mystery imagery. Jesus "rises" here; it's the risen Jesus who acts and speaks. (In fact, one could argue that the entire discourse, chapters 13-17, is pronounced by the risen Jesus.) He "lays down" his outer garment, words used earlier to call us to "lay down" our lives in agape.

Howard Brook goes on:

How many Holy Thursday services and homilies have put priest and bowl before the congregation as an "example" of "lowering oneself like Jesus" to do the dirty work of washing feet. How easy it is for relatively safe and secure middle class Christians to deny the call to death in favor of charity work!

The prevailing interpretation is a function of both the chasm between the position of the interpreter and that of the Johannine community as well as the folly of taking passages out of context. If readers are comfortable, it is enough of a challenge to call them to serve the poor (or even "one another") by humble actions.

But if readers are like the Johannine community -- as people in El Salvador, Malawi, and other places are where proclaiming God's truth is to risk one's life -- "humble service" is a commonplace that requires no exhortation at all. It is the call to help one another face death that is both the challenge and comfort of the gospel.

Between the lines, says Howard Brook, is "the risen Jesus, who lays down his life for his own, girding himself to prepare his disciples to see their own deaths that are approaching!"

From Holy Week then to now, this action is passed down through the generations -- from Mary of Bethany to Jesus to the first disciples through history to the likes of Franz Jagerstatter and Oscar Romero, Ita Ford and Dorothy Stang, and ourselves.

We still need to wash one another's feet, which means, we need to prepare one another to practice Gospel nonviolence, to resist war and injustice, and to accept the consequences of our steadfast resistance to the culture of death.

We should find this fresh reading a comfort. And Holy Week a gift -- a fitting time to fortify one another anew to face the consequences of our public work for disarmament, social and economic justice, and peace. We are not lost, neither are we bereft. Jesus prepares us for the road to peace. Likewise do the martyrs and the communion of saints.

"If you know these things," John's concluding beatitude says, "blessed are you if you do them."

And so this Holy Week, may we enter the story anew and join the lineage of Gospel nonviolence. Let's wash one another's feet, and prepare one another to speak out against U.S. warmaking, corporate greed, executions, nuclear weapons and environmental destruction. And let's encourage one another especially to face every objection and opposition with steadfast nonviolence and loving trust in the God of peace, in the One who has gone before us.

"I have set the example," Jesus said, "and you should do for each other exactly what I have done for you."

John's booklet, "Oscar Romero and the Nonviolent Struggle for Justice" is available from www.paxchristiusa.org. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, PA, see www.kirkridge.org; and "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.