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In Galilee, learning to become a blessed disciple

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Last month, I spent a few quiet days on retreat by the Sea of Galilee. I was hoping for renewal, grace, hope and peace in that holy land before I joined the Sabeel Conference with my Palestinian friends. I was not disappointed. For me, that particular landscape marks the starting point of my vocation as a peacemaker, and continues to inspire me.

In the spring of 1982, I came here on a pilgrimage by myself to ponder the life and teachings of Jesus before I entered the Society of Jesus. After walking through Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and every road in between, I camped out right along the water, a hundred yards from the ruins of Capernaum.

I was mesmerized by the Chapel of the Beatitudes, the small dome shaped church built in the 1930s by Italian Franciscan sisters to commemorate the Sermon on the Mount.

I quickly fell under the spell of Galilee. It looked to me like Hawaii and felt like heaven. I grew oblivious to my surroundings, including the Israeli war then being waged on the people of Lebanon. Years later, I learned how that summer war, which killed 60,000 human beings, was orchestrated by the Pentagon under the theme, "Operation Peace for Galilee."

I was on my own "operation peace for Galilee," walking through the archeological ruins, studying the Sermon on the Mount, and spending hours in that little chapel. When I saw Israeli jets swoop down over the sea on their way to bomb Lebanon, I woke up to the reality of the world's violence and the urgency of Jesus' nonviolence. My work for disarmament and peace began.

Thirty years later, I'm back at the Sea of Galilee, lingering once again in that chapel, walking along the sea, reflecting on my life and the life and teachings of Jesus. A lot of water has gone under the bridge. From my perspective, I feel as if I'm still just beginning to understand the Sermon on the Mount, much

less live it. I look back and see so many failings at love and nonviolence, but still feel called by Jesus to walk the road to peace.

Once again, I'm moved by the geography of the nonviolent Jesus. Walking by the sea, from the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes to the ruins of Capernaum to the Jordan River, I try to feel the spirit of the place. For me, that's a spirit of gentle peace, new hope and resurrection.

During my visit, the sun was shining, a cool clear breeze was blowing, the sea was shimmering a bright blue, and spring seemed to have come early. The land looks quite lush today, but apparently back then, it was a dry desert, right up to the water. In the distance, along the southwestern shore stood the Roman garrison in the imperial town of Tiberius, now a major city.

That garrison was like a specter of death overshadowing the peaceful landscape. It must have terrified the people, and colored Jesus' teachings. No wonder he spoke of peaceful resistance.

As I pondered that reality, I was moved to think of Jesus emerging from the desert to call the poorest of the poor, the landless, the oppressed, the indebted, and the marginalized to join his campaign of nonviolent resistance to imperial occupation. There in the middle of nowhere, he built a movement which he expanded throughout the region and eventually took to Jerusalem.

This is the person we still follow -- a movement organizer who works locally among the poor and oppressed to liberate them and point them to God's realm of justice. He starts a campaign for a new world without injustice, occupation and empire.

A specter still hovers over Galilee -- this time in the form of the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of the nearby Palestinians. If we have eyes to see, it's still a place which can inspire us to organize new movements against imperial injustice and war.

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It's also a place of peace, where the risen Jesus returned to make breakfast for his friends and urge them to follow him on the journey of nonviolence. There by the water, he showed those who had abandoned him with his forgiving spirit of love and healing peace. No wonder they were emboldened to give their lives for him and his realm of justice and peace.

The church, the nation, and the world seem far from the peacemaking Jesus of Galilee. We have surrendered to power and corruption, injustice and greed, war and weapons, arrogance and domination, anger and hate. There is so little peace, so little interest in his spirit of nonviolent love.

Most of us prefer instead to speak with judgment, hatred, and condemnation.

In Galilee, I tasted once again the gentle, loving spirit of Jesus, inviting us to join his campaign, to live out his Sermon on the Mount, and to give our lives to his holy cause. We don't all need to go to Galilee for renewal, of course, but we do need to return from time to time to the source of our vocations as peacemakers.

That may be a way to survive, if not to grow, during this time of discouragement for the church, the nation and the world.

It always helps to take time to hear again our original call to discipleship. When most are caught in

negativity, cynicism, despair and anger, we instead try to listen to the voice of Jesus, hear that invitation, and see ourselves anew as his disciples sent on the mission of peace.

‘Come after me and I will make you fishers of men and women,’ Jesus told the fishermen of Capernaum. Of course, that verse refers back to Jeremiah and the blatant, political call of recruitment he speaks of to God’s campaign for justice and peace.

Lent is a time to renew our discipleship to Jesus. So we might ask ourselves: How is Jesus calling us these days to follow him? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus at this moment in our lives, in history?

How can we reclaim our discipleship as a way to bridge our divisions, heal our wounds, and refocus ourselves on following Jesus? What new steps can we take as active disciples of the nonviolent Jesus?

A quiet Lenten day of recollection and prayer might help open up these questions.

Disciples are ‘students’ of ‘the Teacher.’ At one point, Jesus says we can never become exactly like the teacher, but we can certainly become more like him.

That means, we have to learn our lessons and do our homework (this week’s assignment: read the Sermon on the Mount, Mt. 5-7, and experiment with one new teaching).

We can let go of our judgments, hate and condemnation, and practice unconditional love, heartfelt compassion, generous forgiveness, selfless service and creative nonviolence. As disciples of Jesus, we try to heal those who are wounded and ostracized by the culture, and liberate the oppressed.

We denounce institutionalized injustice, and announce the coming of God’s reign here and now. We know we too have been forgiven, that we’re loved, and that we’re all headed to Jerusalem and the new life of resurrection.

This Lent, may we hear again the call of Jesus and welcome the movement of the Holy Spirit of peace and love -- that together we might keep trying to be his disciples. As the Beatitudes promise, we will be blessed.

This week, John Dear will speak in Kentucky at Brescia University, Berea College, and the Church of the Epiphany in Louisville. Next month, he will lead a retreat on the Sermon on the Mount (April 29-May1) in Los Angeles, and a retreat ‘The School of Prophets,’ on the prophetic tradition from Isaiah to Jesus, (May 20-22) at Kirkridge, near Bangor, PA (www.kirkridge.org). To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and 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. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services’ ‘Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,’ go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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