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The Galilee 72

John Dear | Jul. 26, 2011 On the Road to Peace

I've been traveling across the country these past five months, preaching, leading retreats and giving lectures to all sorts of people about the life and spirituality of peace. Granted, it's an unusual way to spend one's days. I get the impression that most folks find my "peace project" quaint. Of course, I get attacked by the left and the right. On occasion someone tells me I'm wasting my time. Church authorities regularly ban me from their precincts. One Trappist monk told me I've undertaken "a hopeless cause, but a noble one."

For me, however, the mission of peace is something entirely different. I expect it to be about as "effective" as going to Mass, sitting in silent prayer, or visiting the sick. In other words, it makes all the difference!

Lately, I have been returning to a favorite Gospel episode to learn more about this mission on which Jesus sends us. Given the slow downfall of the institutional church, the nation and the world, perhaps more of us need to return to this scene and undertake similar experiments in public peacemaking.

Luke's Gospel portrays the life of the nonviolent Jesus, I suggest, as one long permanent peace campaign. He walks through the countryside, announces God's reign of peace, expels the demons of imperial violence and heals those in need. His very presence is disarming, healing, peacemaking. One morning, after the disciples have searched far and wide for him, he says he must move on "to the other towns, to proclaim the good news of the reign of God, because for this purpose I have been sent"(Luke 4:43). In his "Sermon on the Plain," he teaches them his way of peace, love and nonviolence, then explains how John the Baptist fulfilled that mission to prepare a way for him.

Then, in Luke 9:1-10, he sends 12 disciples out on the mission of peace, to do the work he has been doing -- expelling the demons of imperial violence, healing the sick and announcing God's reign. Take nothing for the journey, and stay wherever you are welcomed, he instructs them. They go on their way "proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere." When they return, he takes them off to a quiet place where they can rest and reflect together on their experience.

Apparently, they did a good job. He was so encouraged by their work, he decides to up the ante and broaden the campaign. When someone approaches and asks to become his follower, he says, "Go and proclaim the reign of God" (Luke 9:60).

Then, in Luke 10:1-20, he gathers "seventy two" unnamed disciples and sends them out in pairs ahead of him to announce God's reign, heal the sick, expel the demons and invite everyone into his new life of peace.

Imagine sending 36 teams of nonviolence trainers into the war-torn countryside to invite people out of war, poverty and empire into the new life of loving nonviolence! Jesus is not just a community organizer or a movement builder; he's a nonviolent general who commands a nonviolent army. Instead of waging war, he wages peace. He sends them out to disarm everyone, dismantle the empire, and lead humanity into the peace of God's reign. He mobilizes an astonishing campaign of active nonviolence, an authentic peace movement -- right there on the edge of a brutal empire.

Just as Mahatma Gandhi organized the 1930 Salt March (with 79 trained nonviolent resisters) and Dr. King organized the 1963 Birmingham Campaign (with trained nonviolent high school students), Jesus gives specific instructions for his *satyagraha* campaign.

"Go on your way!" he begins. Note the imperative: *Get going! Go forth and make peace!* In Matthew he says, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" -- which means there are times when we get to "coo," but times when we need to "hiss." Here, he says simply: "Behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves."

What an image! Jesus sends us into the world of war, greed and violence as peaceful, gentle, unarmed, nonviolent people. We are to be as vulnerable and harmless as lambs.

But stay with his image. Imagine a little lamb surrounded by a pack of wolves. That's Jesus' description of the peacemaker's life! What can we expect when we go forth to make peace? To be eaten alive!

This has been my experience. Yes, I've met many nonviolent peacemakers and been well received here and there, but I have also found myself surrounded by a pack of wolves that growl, show their teeth and seem ready to pounce.

The problem for me and most of us is that we forget our "lamb" nature and think we have to become wolves in order to transform the other wolves. That is not the way of the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God.

Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing, Jesus says elsewhere. If we undertake this painful mission of peacemaking in a culture of war, we need to be lambs in lambs' clothing, not wolves in sheep's clothing. We need to get rid of the violence within, the roots of war and empire that lurk inside us. Since we are all addicted to violence, perhaps it's better to say: we need to befriend our inner "wolf" and disarm him. We need to participate in our own inner disarmament and cultivate our true nonviolent nature if we are going to enter the culture of violence, meanness and militarism and offer a real gift of peace and disarmament. The goal, we remember, is that the lion -- and the wolf -- will lie down with the lamb. Neither kills nor is killed.

The details of the mission are astonishing: Take nothing for the journey -- no money, no sack, no sandals -- and greet no one on the way. When we remember that he's sending his followers into the Galilean countryside where the Roman death squads roam around, on the prowl to steal, rape, pillage and kill -- then his admonition makes perfect sense. He's organizing an underground movement. His advice is practical. They have to be on alert, ready to go.

Their mission is to proclaim peace, bring peace, make peace, and transform the world into God's peace. "When you enter a house, say: 'Peace to this household,' he explains. "If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him ? Eat and drink what they serve, and do not move about. Cure the sick and announce the reign of God. Say, 'The reign of God is at hand for you.' If they reject you, shake off the dust from that town, but repeat, 'The reign of God is at hand.' Whoever listens to you, listens to me; whoever rejects you, rejects me and the One who sent me."

Every word should be about peace. When we speak, we engage in the spiritual conversation that "makes for peace." We try to make people feel at peace, to be a peaceful presence in their midst, to affirm their peace, and to lead people deeper into God's peace in their own lives, even in their own homes. By being calm, peaceful, and nonviolent, he suggests, we offer a healing gift.

I think this gift is needed everywhere today -- in every heart, every house, every nation. We are all being ground under the wheels of war, greed and empire. Worse, we Christians seem hell-bent on a mission of war. The insane mass murderer in Norway claimed to be a devout Christian. And Christians kill children in Iraq and

Afghanistan, and make nuclear weapons in Los Alamos and Oak Ridge. We have become wolves sent out by the Pentagon into the midst of lambs.

The Galilee 72 apparently fulfilled their mission. They returned, we're told, "rejoicing." Not only were they able to help others become more nonviolent and peaceful, they found the experience of peacemaking consoling. They were filled with joy.

If we do God's work of public peacemaking, we learn here, we will be filled with the Holy Spirit of peace and joy. This rings true. Despite the rejection and persecution one can face for denouncing war, greed and nuclear weapons, this work offers deep inner joy and spiritual consolation.

Jesus' reaction is even more amazing. "I observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky," he tells them. Satan is always a codeword, in my book, for empire. Peace movement-building erodes the culture of war, greed and empire, then and now. His campaign of nonviolence was the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire.

"Behold, I have given you power," he tells them. "Nothing will harm you... Rejoice because your names are written in heaven." What a promise! We have been given power. Gandhi best understood this teaching. He often told the poor of India that they had more power than the British Empire in all its glory. He described active nonviolence as a power "more powerful than all the weapons of the world combined" -- if only we dared to use it. If we claim it, practice it, and live it, we can trust that our survival is already guaranteed. Nothing can truly hurt us. More, we can rejoice because we are known in God's reign of peace.

After affirming the 72, we're told, "At that moment, Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit?" It is one of the only occasions in the Gospel where Jesus is filled with joy. That outcome alone was worth their effort.

Why do we hear so little today about the Galilee 72? Who were they? What became of them? Why don't we honor and emulate them? Don't we want to fulfill the mission of peace, have our names written in heaven, and make Jesus rejoice?

St. Francis took this passage to heart. He saw his life as a long peacemaking mission, and tried to send his brothers and sisters out on that mission. Perhaps we need to experiment with this text, too, and head out into the world with the gift of peace.

Given the horrors of our world, the demise of the institutional church, our nation, and the environment, this Gospel story offers a way forward. I think Jesus is still looking to send people on the mission of disarming nonviolence. We might ask ourselves, "How has my life fulfilled that mission of peace? How can I take up this mission of peace today? How is Jesus sending us as nonviolent peacemaking lambs into the midst of wolves to announce the good news of peace and practice nonviolence, so that we might all dwell together in God's reign of peace?"

We have been given great power. No harm will come to us. The old ways of empire are falling. Our names are being written in heaven. Rejoice, and get going!

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[**Editor's Note**: John Dear's column is on a summer schedule and will be posted every other week through early August.]

Next year, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John for an evening talk and book-signing at your church, send an email

through www.johndear.org [1]. From August 8-15, John will offer a weeklong retreat on Jesus' teachings on peace, hope and love at the spectacular Ghost Ranch Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico (www.ghostranch.org). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books 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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