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Jesus' last words to the church

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This past spring, I received an invitation to meet the organizer of the National Prayer Breakfast, an evangelical Christian organization that brings together the president, members of Congress and the Supreme Court, and virtually every putative Christian in the government.

Mother Theresa famously addressed the gathering in the early '90s and fiercely denounced abortion. This year, Bono gave an equally forceful address, calling upon the government to end AIDS, HIV and extreme poverty in Africa.

There was some discussion that they might invite me to speak. Unlikely. An ex-con and long-time anti-war activist, they'll never tolerate my addressing the evangelicals in the government about the Gospel of Jesus.

Nonetheless, I was glad to meet the coordinator -- for decades Billy Graham's assistant and organizer -- because I heard such good things about him.

He feels passionately about the Gospel of Jesus. Turns out, he had spent a great deal of time with Mother Theresa and made retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani -- two things we shared in common. I liked him immensely.

But what does one say to such a prestigious Christian? I heard he had a few things to discuss, but I wanted to get right to the point. We shook hands and I asked him, "As the soldiers approached Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemani, what last words did he say to the church?"

My new friend looked at me. He didn't know.

"'Put down the sword.' Jesus spent his life teaching and practicing creative nonviolence," I explained. "He commanded us to love our enemies and become blessed peacemakers."

As the soldiers laid hold of Jesus, a disciple drew his sword and struck a follower of Jesus employing the soldiers tactics. A disciple unnamed, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but John's Gospel names the man. The sword-wielding disciple was none other than Peter himself. Hardly a hero. We learn later that, as Jesus' trial got underway, Peter denied he knew Jesus at all. Perhaps Peter resorted to violence not to protect Jesus but his own sweet skin.

When I speak of Gospel nonviolence around the nation, many respond to this effect: Well, John, this is all well and good, but sometimes you just have to kill someone! Sometimes war is justified. We really do have to kill Hitler, or Noriega, or Saddam, or Osama. (Or whomever are told from time to time we're supposed to kill.)

If indeed the just-war theory finds endorsement in the Gospels, then the garden scene stands as the ultimate moment in history in which it could have been applied. In that case Peter, in drawing his sword, would have fulfilled a divine mission to protect his guy, the holy innocent one. But at the precise moment Jesus commands the opposite. "Put down the sword."

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I think this was the moment when the disciples finally understood Jesus and his teachings. They suddenly realized: He's deadly serious about peace, love and nonviolence. I imagine them agape as the matter unfolded before them. Jesus would not defend himself with violence, a burden they could not share. And so off they ran, every man for himself. And Jesus endures his passion without anger, without fighting back. As Gandhi said, he practiced the most perfect nonviolence in history. I regard Jesus as the incarnation of nonviolence, the embodiment of the God of love and peace.

We have spent the last 1,700 years, denying Jesus' final command. We have justified warfare, led our crusades, and stamped every bombing raid and nuclear weapon with our blessing.

But the commandment remains: "Put down the sword." I think one day the church will realize that the just war theory has no place in the gospel. They'll realize it was by no means exemplified by the life of Jesus. And the theory will fall into disrepute. One day the church will teach only gospel nonviolence. And Christians everywhere will quit the military and refuse to join. They'll obstruct warfare and beat all swords into plowshares.

I'm not the only one who thinks this. The U.S. Catholic bishops' peace pastoral letter of 1984 said nonviolence was perfectly legitimate for Catholics. And on May 2, 2003, a few years before becoming pope, Benedict wrote: "There were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq. To say nothing of the fact that, given the new weapons that make possible destructions that go beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a just war."

My new friend sat silent for a time. A look of thoughtfulness settled over his face and he said, "That is a very important observation." I pressed him further. I asked, "How seriously do we want to take the commandments of Jesus? We can pray, go to church, read about him, and organize influential gatherings

to lead others to him. But I think Jesus wants foremost for us to obey him by putting down our swords, renouncing violent self-defense, tearing up the just war theory, abolishing our weapons, putting an end to our wars, and becoming people of universal, nonviolent love. If we are serious about Jesus in these perilous times, we have to non-cooperate with every aspect of war."

The unarmed Christ wants his community, the church, to be a community of creative, loving nonviolence, I submit. Its God's holy gift to the world. The challenge, then, is to take him at his word.

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