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Becoming attendants of the nonviolent Jesus

John Dear | Mar. 12, 2013 On the Road to Peace

As we process through Lent toward Holy Week, it may be helpful to recall Jesus' testimony in court before Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire. For me, these words sum up the Christian life of peace and nonviolence:

> My kingdom does not belong to this world.
>
> If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Judeans.
>
> But as it is, my kingdom is not here (John 18:36 [1]).

Here, the Gospel sets in stark contrast the choice before us: His kingdom and its members live in perfect nonviolence while the kingdoms, nations and empires of the world practice violence and wage war. The sole difference is nonviolence.

I know I'm a broken record about this topic, but I do not understand how any Christian or Catholic can support war or America's empire in light of such texts. Yet everywhere I go, I hear from Christians and Catholics who support war and empire. We want it both ways: Jesus and violence.

I hear the Gospel saying: Either we follow Jesus and reject war and empire, practice his creative nonviolence and do not engage in violence, or we do not follow Jesus and support empire and war, reject his creative nonviolence and engage in violence. For me, it's a clear-cut choice: If you want to be a Christian, you have to become nonviolent and attend to him and his brave nonviolence. If you support war and empire, you have chosen not to side with Jesus.

This verse gives one of the best descriptions of God's reign, the way of Jesus and Christian discipleship in the New Testament. In his kingdom, Jesus explains, there is no fighting, which means there is no violence, no war, no weapons, no killing and no death. It is a realm of perfect nonviolent love.

I think this is very good news, but its pronouncement remains totally alien to us. We cannot imagine anyone who is truly nonviolent, much less a world of perfect nonviolence. To speak this way is to be dismissed as idealistic at best. But according to the story, Jesus gave his life announcing this truth of nonviolence and modeled it unto his last breath.

It's strange that we rarely hear this text discussed. Why is that? I think it's because we do not want the nonviolence of Jesus. We prefer to fight like everyone else. We know deep down that if this text is true, our violence reveals we are not "attendants" of the nonviolent Jesus, but servants of the culture of war and empire. We want to be on Jesus' good side, but we don't want to get too close. We're used to violence, war and empire. His talk of a kingdom of nonviolence is a dream.

What intrigues me about this Holy Week text is the word *attendant*. The word "attendant" is gentle and provocative. It speaks of someone standing nearby, who waits to serve at a moment's notice, someone who attends to the other's every need. The dictionary defines an attendant as "one who serves," or simply, "being present." We think of an attendant nurse, waiting beside the patient in illness and death, or a flight attendant, whose primary task is our safety.

Isn't every Christian called to be an attendant of the nonviolent Jesus? In God's reign of peace, the nonviolent Jesus will have, I suppose, billions of attendants. We will all get the chance to serve and wait upon the nonviolent Jesus in his reign of universal love and infinite peace.

So Lent asks an unlikely question: Do we want to be "attendants" of the nonviolent Jesus? I suppose the honest answer is: No. We prefer to be attendants of America, its militaries and weapons and guns, its way of empire. We are used to violence; it's bred deep within us. We are brainwashed to think of violence as normal. We know how to be attendants to the president, the pope, television, the nightly news, our bank accounts, our bosses, culture, power, prestige and ego. We know how to attend to the things of the world. Perhaps we think being an attendant to Jesus is encumbering. Actually, attending to America, money, war and the culture enslaves us; attending to Jesus frees us to live in peace and love.

Lent invites us to reimagine our lives as attendants of the nonviolent Jesus. That means we need to let go of our violence and train ourselves in the way of Gospel nonviolence. As attendants, we do not engage in violence or own weapons. We do not support war or empire or the U.S. military or its weapons. Instead, we choose the creative nonviolence exemplified by Jesus. We practice unconditional love, side with the poor and the enemy, show compassion, speak out for peace, and resist the culture of war and empire, come what may. And we never retaliate with further violence.

As attendants of the nonviolent Jesus, we are the people who break the never-ending downward cycle of violence. But more, we are "present" to Jesus as best we can be. We try to live close by his side. This is a simple but basic Christian practice. It sounds awfully pious, but I find it difficult, political and dangerous. We're talking here about siding with a resister and a martyr.

As we walk toward Holy Week, we might practice being attendants of the nonviolent Jesus. How do we do that? Perhaps we can try first to be attendants of one another, especially those in need. We can attend to the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the elderly, the imprisoned and the enemy. We can attend to the God of peace in our prayer. We can attend to the word of God in the Gospels. We can attend to those who work for justice, disarmament and peace. And we can attend to our own inner spirit of nonviolence, so that slowly over time, we might let go of our violence, hatreds and resentments, and cultivate interior nonviolence.

Such preparations will help us become attendants of the nonviolent Jesus. That, I believe, is the great calling of every Christian, much to the dismay of the culture of war and its attendants.

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John Dear will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker [2]," April 5-7 in East Stroudsburg, Pa. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website [3]. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For* [4]. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [5] explores 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. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [6]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [7] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [8], *Put Down Your Sword* [9] and *A Persistent Peace* [10], are available

from Amazon.com.

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