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## Jesus' baptism is key to his peacemaking

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This past weekend, a group of us gathered in the Poconos near East Stroudsburg, Pa., for a simple weekend retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker." We looked at general themes of peacemaking in his life, then focused on Luke 10 and how he sends 72 disciples out on a mission of peace ("like lambs sent into the midst of wolves"). We then shared stories from the missions of peace we had undertaken during our own lives. We concluded Sunday morning with reflections about encountering the risen, peacemaking Jesus, like the downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus, and how he turns us around with new hope to carry on the struggle of peace.

One of my questions was: How did he do it? How did Jesus practice such perfect peacemaking? How did he embody nonviolence so well, as Gandhi said he did?

We looked for clues in the story of Jesus' baptism, when he is at prayer by the Jordan River and hears God say, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." This moment holds the key in my understanding of Jesus' peacemaking life: Unlike the rest of us, Jesus accepts this announcement of God's nonviolent love for him and claims his true identity as the beloved son of the God of peace. From then on, he knows who he is. He's faithful to this discovery of his identity until the moment he dies.

I think God tells every one of us, "You are my beloved." If we could hear this invitation and claim this truth as our core identity, we too could go forth into the culture of war as peacemakers. This insight, I believe, is the key to Christian nonviolence, the spiritual life and our very humanity.

Once Jesus accepts his identity as the beloved son of the God of peace, he goes into the desert to pray and fast for 40 days, and he's tempted to renounce that identity, which means he's tempted to do violence and live a false spirituality of violence and war. The temptations begin: "Oh yeah? If you are the son of God, then prove it. Do this, do that. Do violence to yourself, be effective, worship power, lose your soul."

In the desert, Jesus refuses to reject his true identity and decides to live every moment of his life in relationship to the God of peace as God's beloved son. In doing so, he receives the strength to reject every temptation to violence and practice militant nonviolence. He remains faithful to that identity and relationship every moment for the rest of his life. Throughout his peacemaking life, people challenge that identity, whether from the demons being expelled or the religious authorities. Even as he dies on the cross, the passers-by taunt him, saying, "If you are the son of God, prove it: Come down from that cross." But he remains faithful to the voice that says, "You are my beloved." Knowing who he is, rooted in the God of peace, he can be a nonviolent human being and go forth into the world of war to make peace.

If he had renounced his identity, he would have done violence and been a war maker. Because he remained faithful to the God of peace and God's love, he was centered in peace and able to practice astonishing nonviolence.

If the story ended there, that would be enough. But in his teachings on peace and nonviolence, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus throws open the invitation to the whole human race. "Blessed are the peacemakers; they are the sons and daughters of the God of peace." Everyone is the beloved son or daughter of the God of peace, which means everyone is called to be, like him, a peacemaker. He connects the question of our identity, who are we, to peacemaking and nonviolence. Love your enemies, he teaches at the high point of his sermon, then you are really sons and daughters of the God of universal nonviolent love, the God who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

I've never heard anyone talk about this before, except perhaps Henri Nouwen, who was beginning to explore this theme at the time of his death. This is the key to our work for peace: We are the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace, so we go forth into the world of war and make peace. This is the true identity of everyone, though few hear it, understand it, know it or claim it. That's why nonviolence can be defined as remembering and recalling every day in our meditation who we are: the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace, sisters and brothers of every human being on the planet, people of universal, nonviolent love.

Violence stems from not knowing who we are, from forgetting our true identities. If we don't know we are God's beloved, if we forget that other people are our beloved sisters and brothers, we harm ourselves and others -- or shoot and bomb and vaporize them.

The culture of war and violence is always trying to tell us who we are, to name us. Too often, we let it tell us who we are. And so, we claim many false or secondary identities. We let the culture identify us as American, conservative or liberal, right or left, Democrat or Republican, and so forth. Some of us base our entire lives in a false identity. We don't know who we are.

## Advertisement

Remember the old TV commercial for the U.S. Marines? If you really want to be all you can be, join the Marines and kill for the empire! The military always apes the Gospel. In this case, they actually said that to be your best true self, to be all that you can possibly be, you have to kill for America. This is exactly

the voice of the tempter to Jesus in the desert.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells us who we are: God's beloved sons and daughters, which means we are all sisters and brothers, and as children of the God of peace, we are peacemakers, people of nonviolence who could never hurt one another. This realization challenges our understanding of God (a God of peace), our understanding of what the church should be (a community of peace and nonviolence), and our understanding of what life is about (a journey of disarming our hearts and our world and welcoming a new world of peace).

This is why quiet meditation is crucial to the life of peace, love and nonviolence. There, in that silent meditation, we can let God say to us, "You are my beloved." We give God permission to name us and love us. Prayer is ultimately about our relationship with the God of peace and love. I highly recommend it: It's nice to be with a nonviolent God who wants to love us with infinite kindness.

In our quiet meditation, we encounter a God of peace and discover we are part of the God of peace, and so we go forth as peacemakers. As we let God love us, we begin to know God as a loving, trustworthy, nonviolent parent. For the rest of our lives, we try to live in that love, like Jesus, and share that love and peace and go forth in that spirit of nonviolent love and peace. We understand ourselves as the beloved sons and daughters of the God of love and peace and return daily to that living reality to dwell in God's loving presence. Over time, all our actions, work, relationships and politics come from and reflect this peaceful "belovedness." We become peacemakers, just like the peacemaking Jesus. This is the Christian spiritual life in a nutshell. This is what Jesus hopes for us. This is how we can go forth on his mission of peace "like lambs sent into the midst of wolves."

When did you know or hear that you are the beloved son or daughter of the God of peace? I asked those at the retreat. How do we claim our core identity as a beloved son or daughter of the God of peace? How can we remember every day that we are all sons and daughters of the God of peace, and therefore sisters and brothers to everyone else on the planet? How can we practice the militant nonviolence of Jesus in our own lives in this world of violence? What does it mean for you to be a peacemaker like Jesus the peacemaker? These are good questions to sit with.

The more we can claim our core identities as God's beloved sons and daughters, the better we will be able to practice nonviolence like Jesus and fulfill the mission of peace that he sends us on.

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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. John is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Reigle and with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. One of John's essays on Jesus' nonviolent action in the temple appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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