

'Shall we strike with a sword?' No to war in Syria

John Dear | Sep. 10, 2013 On the Road to Peace

One day, when Jesus was marching toward Jerusalem, some of the hated enemy Samaritans denounced him for his nonviolent campaign. The disciples were furious, appalled, filled with moral indignation. They suddenly forgot Jesus' lofty talk: "Love your enemies"; "offer no violent resistance to one who does evil"; "blessed are the peacemakers." They were ready for war, and they had a just cause.

"Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" James and John asked Jesus. It is one of most shocking questions in the Gospels, one of the most blatant examples of their complete misunderstanding of Jesus.

They wanted to emulate the prophet Elijah, who called down hellfire from the skies and killed his enemies. They didn't yet understand that Jesus offers an entirely new way of life where peaceful means lead to peaceful ends. They remain clueless about life in the footsteps of the nonviolent Jesus.

We're not much different from them.

"Jesus turned and rebuked them" ([Luke 9:54-55](#) [1]). That's all we're told -- and it's enough.

"No," he says. "My disciples do not call down hellfire from heaven. We do not kill anyone, no matter how noble the cause. My disciples love everyone, including the hated enemy."

Jesus refuses to respond to violence with further violence, much less killing or war. He's had it with vengeance and the tired old ways of violence. He rebukes any interest in warfare. His way is something the world has never seen before: a way of steadfast nonviolence. Not passivity, but active confrontation with empire, the kind that leads to his civil disobedience action, his arrest, torture and execution. Because of his specific way of nonviolence, Jesus dies without fighting back.

With Jesus, the days of violence are over. The nonviolent resistance continues, but we no longer use the world's means of violence to get our way or even defend ourselves.

I think that's what Jesus would say today to those planning to bomb Syria. He would turn and rebuke us and continue on his campaign to confront empire, and religious support for empire, and call all of us back to the wisdom of nonviolence.

The disciples did not learn this fundamental lesson until after his resurrection. Even as he offers them his body and blood at the Passover meal, as the soldiers come to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, they reject his nonviolence and take up swords for the kill.

"Shall we strike with the sword?" they ask him ([Luke 22:49](#) [2]).

Poor Jesus. They never learn. And neither do we.

No, he says. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. Put down the sword.

Those are the last words of Jesus to the church before he is hauled off to his death. There, in the Garden of Gethsemane, they finally understand his stubborn commitment to nonviolence. They finally get it, and once they do, they run for the hills. They all abandon him. They cannot tolerate his stubborn nonviolence.

Not much has changed. Today, as our war-making president, Congress and Pentagon plan to bomb Syria, the media urge us to call down hellfire from heaven. Everyone is asking, like the clueless disciples, "Shall we strike with a sword?"

I could write at length about the reasons why a U.S. attack on Syria would be foolish, futile and deadly. As countless others have said so well, it will be costly, ineffective, immoral and illegal. Bombing chemical weapons factories could lead to the release of further chemical weapons, trigger widespread regional warfare and cause the deaths of millions of other innocent people. Using the same means as the war-making Syrian regime is not the way to end those means; it makes us their equal, or worse.

Several friends of mine visited Syria recently, and they report what one always hears from the grass-roots peace movement everywhere: "Don't bomb us! We've had enough killing already!" Few ever ask what the suffering people on the ground want, but I hear that church leaders and peace people at the base are begging us not to bomb them.

The United States has never proposed a solution to this crisis. I think it wants war; it wants Syria to burn down, like it wanted Iraq to burn down, and Afghanistan, and hopefully Iran. The United States has chemical weapons, too, and many other types of evil weapons of mass destruction, so it's hypocritical for the U.S. to claim any morality, much less concern for the suffering poor.

But I would like to remind us that as followers of the nonviolent Jesus, we have been commanded to put down the sword, reject the militarism of empire and find another way. We are called to practice the aggressive nonviolent resistance that Jesus demonstrated unto death. That means, as I explain in my new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, we have to help build a global grass-roots movement of nonviolence that works for the abolition of war, weapons, injustice, poverty, nuclear bombs and empire and create a new kind of nonviolent world where all international conflict is resolved nonviolently, where every sister and brother lives peacefully with dignity.

That means, too, that if we want to take the high moral ground and insist others cannot have weapons of mass destruction, we cannot have weapons of mass destruction. We need to cut our military budget; dismantle our nuclear weapons; end all U.S. military aid to Israel, Egypt and elsewhere; join with international law and the International Court of Justice; and fund nonviolent conflict resolution through a new kind of moral, global pressure that puts an end to the killings we are witnessing. Pursuing this vision of nonviolence is the best response to the crisis in Syria -- and in Egypt, Palestine, Afghanistan, Detroit, Sudan and elsewhere.

International global pressure can lead to dialogue, negotiation and transformation. I saw it work in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s. It can work in Syria, Palestine, Egypt and anywhere if it's funded and tried. War only leads to the senseless death of thousands of children and sows the seeds for future wars.

Jesus seems to understand all this and points us to the higher road of nonviolence and active resistance. He spent his energies confronting the empire, disobeying it and resisting it. Since the United States is the world's largest, most dangerous empire, I think he would want U.S. Christians to resist the ways of empire and help welcome God's reign of nonviolence in our midst.

"War is the suicide of humanity," [Pope Francis said recently](#) [3]. That gets at the heart of the question. War is suicidal. We need to become nonviolent people, dismantle our weapons, teach one another nonviolence and institutionalize structures for a new kind of nonviolent world.

In the meantime, Jesus is rebuking us. He's commanding us to put down the sword.

Do we want to listen to him and do what he says or run away from him? I suggest we listen to him and obey him. He -- not the media pundits, politicians, lobbyists or generals -- is the only one worth listening to.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, can be ordered at [paceebene.org](#) [4]. John is currently on a speaking tour of Scotland. Next year, he will tour the United States speaking about the life of nonviolence. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to [John Dear's website](#) [5] or contact the Franciscan-based peace group [Pace e Bene](#) [6]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [7] 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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Links:

[1] <http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?bk=Luke&ch=9&v=50009054>

[2] <http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?bk=Luke&ch=22&v=50022049>

[3] <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-war-is-the-suicide-of-humanity>

[4] <http://paceebene.org/store/item/nonviolent-life>

[5] <http://www.johndear.org/>

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[7]

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI)

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[8] [http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

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[9] [http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-](http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword-Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1)

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[10] [http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

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