

Jesus' nonviolence according to the Gospels

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This paper explores the Gospels' teachings concerning Jesus' nonviolence.

In Pope Francis' 2017 New Year's Day message, he gave a brief summary of some of the ways that Jesus taught and practiced nonviolence. He wrote:

"Jesus himself lived in violent times ... But Christ's message in this regard offers a radically positive approach. He unfailingly preached God's unconditional love, which welcomes and forgives. He taught his disciples to love their enemies (cf. *Mt* 5:44) and to turn the other cheek (cf. *Mt* 5:39). When he stopped her accusers from stoning the woman caught in adultery (cf. *Jn* 8:1-11), and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (cf. *Mt* 26:52).

The title of his address, "Nonviolence: A Style of *Politics* for Peace" may at first seem unusual or surprising. We are more accustomed to thinking of Jesus in terms of our personal salvation as when Jesus said: "Come unto me all you who are weary or heavily burdened and I will give you rest—for my burden is easy and my yoke is light." Jesus is indeed concerned about us personally, about our inner peace—but he is also concerned for us politically. Jesus was not political in a narrow sense such as belonging to a particular political party. To be political in this broader context means three things: First, one is political if one is deeply concerned and engaged with the way a society is being run and the direction a society is headed. Second, one is political if one tries to touch the consciences of the people and the leadership of one's society. Third, one is political if one is concerned and working for those who are being left out or left behind.

Jesus was actively engaged with his society and concerned about the direction it was going. He was engaged with the leaders of his society, especially the Pharisees, priests and representatives of the Roman occupiers and he was attempting to influence them. He was actively concerned with those who were being left out—in fact, *cast out*, of his society.

Reading the Gospels with that in mind brings to the fore many important aspects of Jesus' life and teaching and it makes clear just how fully Jesus embraced nonviolence both as a way of being and a way of exercising power.

By way of an introductory overview, a close reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus was a **full spectrum, nonviolent peacemaker**.

We will explore seven important findings:

1. Jesus teaches us how to **prevent** violence and seal it off at its origins by his teaching on love of enemies. (Mt. 5:43-45) By refusing to see anyone as an *allogenes*, an alien or enemy, the violence that begins in the mind through the act of labeling is stopped before it can fester.
2. When violence does break out he teaches us how to use transforming initiatives, how to **intervene** with practical, creative nonviolent practices that stop the escalation of violence. (Mt. 5: 38-42).
3. He shows us how to attack and overcome the **structural causes** of violence and suffering through **civil resistance**--nonviolent direct action. In Jesus' day the main pillars of Jewish life and society—Sabbath, Torah and Temple—were controlled by often self-interested elites operating within the Roman imperial context. Jesus modeled how to go after causalities, not just presenting symptoms. (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13; John 14:27; Mark 11: 15-17).
4. He teaches and models a way to **reconcile** a community after it has been ripped apart by violence and division. He teaches a way to bring a community back together again by giving agency to the victim, making the guilty accountable and through sublime acts of forgiveness. (Mt. 18: 15-17, 20; Mt. 18:21; Luke 23:14).
5. He demonstrates how to **defend the innocent** with nonviolent action instead of violence. (John 8: 4-10).
6. He shows us how to construct a **community and culture of nonviolence** as an antithesis to regimes of domination through violence.
7. He shows us how to live a life of nonviolence **to the full and to the end**.

The historical/economic situation of Jesus' teaching:

At the birth of Jesus, the Magi asked Herod the Great about the location of this newly-born "King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2). For them, that was only travel directions, but for Herod, it was high treason. Rome had conquered Israel in the year 63 BCE. Thereafter, only the Roman Empire could appoint a "King of the Jews," and Rome had already appointed Herod as its chosen client-ruler of Israel.

The birth, life and death of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament took place within this context of official and ever-deepening Romanization in Jesus' Jewish homeland. The Jews were an oppressed people, kept in line by the threat of violence. Tax revenue was regularly sent to Rome to help finance Rome's wars of expansion. Herod's additional taxes went to build elaborate buildings and cities. From every side the people in the countryside were being squeezed. Debt forced many off their precious parcels of land. It was not surprising that after Herod died in 4 BCE, just after Jesus' birth, their anger sparked a violent revolt. The capital of

Galilee, Sepphoris, the home of wealthy landowners, was attacked and its armory raided. In response, the Roman general Varus sent part of his army into Galilee under Gaius and he “routed all who opposed him, captured and burnt the city of Sepphoris and reduced the inhabitants to slavery.”¹ Sepphoris was four miles from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. Jesus no doubt grew up hearing the story of “The Day the Romans Came,” when Rome struck terror into the hearts of a people.

Rome’s imperial power was military, economic, and political, but also religious, theological, and even eschatological. The Romanization of Israel involved a clash between empire and colony, but also more profoundly between the Kingdom of Rome with its human vision of civilization, and the Kingdom of God as the divine vision of creation. But how could a God of distributive justice tolerate a world of imperial injustice? God declares in Torah that “the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Leviticus 25:23). Israel’s Romanization involved not just a human and colonial struggle against imperial violence and oppression, but a divine and eschatological struggle for justice and peace on earth (Luke 2:13-14).

The economics of this time of Romanization comes through in Jesus’ parabolic discourse. His parables, as a rhetoric of nonviolent challenge, invited his listeners to think about the results all around them: from the *tenants* in Matthew 21:33-39 and the *laborers*—who stand in the marketplace looking for work all day—in Matthew 20:1-16 to the *debtors* in Luke 16:1-7 and the *bandits* in Luke 10:30-37. More succinctly, those who had something got much more, and those who had nothing, lost even that, as articulated in the warning aphorism of Matthew 13:12 and 25:29.

The incarnation of Jesus enters the deepest level of this fundamental clash. Both sides focused on an individual person who both embodies the vision, and incarnates the advent of this ultimate earthly transformation. In Rome’s vision, its dawning Golden Age was incarnated in Augustus Caesar, the bringer of Roman peace, who is portrayed as both human and divine. Israel’s eschatological understanding and hope focused on expectations of the Messiah, a human leader suffused with divine power to deliver his people from imperial oppression.

The context of Jesus’ life and teaching was a clash therefore between not only a great empire and a small colony, but between two fundamentally different visions for the ultimate destiny of the human race, two diametrically opposed strategies for establishing peace on earth. It is helpful to keep this context in mind when we reflect on Jesus’ nonviolence.

1. *“Love your enemies” is the bedrock of Jesus’ nonviolence*

¹ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.68 and *Jewish Antiquities* 17.289

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount on "love your enemies" is theological

Love of enemies is not just human ethical teaching. It is revealed to us in the sacred scriptures and confirmed in Jesus' lived experience with God. It is deeply theological. It goes beyond conventional human wisdom. Jesus' nonviolence rests on his deep, passionate communion with God. Jesus teaches and practices nonviolence because he has come to know that his Father, his Abba, is nonviolent.

The teaching: *You have heard it said, "You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes the sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends the rain on those who do good and those who do evil. (Matt. 5:43-45).*

Jesus' teaching on "love your enemies" is distinctive to Jesus because it is so all-embracing, so far reaching and so rooted in his theological vision. It rests on bedrock. When we drill down to bedrock we find the sure, solid base on which we can build. Jesus points out the creator of the universe, the source and power of all, is nonviolent. If the creator of all is nonviolent—as Jesus says, "God sends the rain on the good and the bad and shines the sun on the just and unjust" -- then we are on solid ground if we act as he acts. He has created all and he cherishes all. From Genesis 1 we learned that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. That is the reason why all human beings have innate dignity. Every human being is a *sacrosanct* creature.

We know that Jesus was deeply versed in the Jewish scriptures. The evangelists portray Jesus as one who speaks in a way that continually calls to mind passages from the Jewish scriptures. Luke's account (Luke 24) of Jesus' encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus after the events of Holy Week tells us the lens he used to interpret the scriptures. The disciples were despondent and confused. As they walked along, Jesus came up to them and walked beside them, but they did not recognize him. He began to explain to them how to read the scriptures. He said, "How slow you are to all that the prophets have told you. Did not the Christ have to suffer and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Then starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages that were about himself. They said after he had left them, "Were not our hearts burning within us as he explained the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Jesus focused on a key to understanding the Jewish scriptures as a whole—on the violence willingly suffered by him, the messiah. There is no sense of retribution from God against those who committed the violence to his highly favored one. Instead, the violence that was willingly suffered led to glory.

Jesus seemed to understand that in the long development of his peoples' scriptures, understandings of God's relationship to violence and retribution had varied and changed. On

one hand, the seeds of the idea that divine restorative justice interrupts the predatory logic of blood vengeance were already planted in the primal narrative of Genesis, with God's "protection" of the murderer Cain (Gen 4:15). On the other hand, the deity portrayed sometimes in the Hebrew scriptures appears to approve of, and even inspire, bloody war on enemies—however exaggerated those old tales may be. The historical context and developing understandings of God in the face of suffering, are important to note—disasters such as exile were interpreted within an ancient worldview which assumed difficult circumstances should be attributed to divine anger. In particular, before monotheism (belief in one God) fully developed, there was an understanding that a community's fate depended upon the comparative strength of its deity. But Jesus never cites these texts, preferring the witness of the prophets. He had come to see that there is no violence in God, and that testimonies that sanction such were actually projections of vengeful and violent human beings.

It is worth reflecting on the scriptural passages that Jesus does emphasize, which follow the "golden thread" woven through the five adjectives describing God in Exodus 34:6: "Yahweh is merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving and forever steadfast." For example, Jesus:

- Ignores some texts (e.g. most of Numbers, Judges or Joshua);
- Is selective with others (for example, he does not mention the 28 "thou shalt nots" in Leviticus 18-20, but *does* cite 19:18: "You must love your neighbor as yourself"); and
- Occasionally redacts out themes of retribution in others (as in his citation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18-19, in which he deliberately omits the last line of 61:2b: "... and the day of vengeance of our God").

Jesus affirms the indiscriminately compassionate God who begins to emerge in the prophetic books, who is ever faithful to the covenant, persisting in love despite human hardness (such as Hosea's metaphor of a husband's fidelity to an unfaithful wife). Jesus embraces Second Isaiah's idea that not only will God refuse to use force against humans, but will send a suffering servant, who will show humanity a new way to deal with violence: "he submitted to be struck down and did not open his mouth though he had done no violence and spoke no word of treachery" (Isaiah 53:7-9). Jesus sought to embody this conviction that God's salvation intends nothing less than to rescue us from our violence and ideologies of vengeance.

Love of enemies begins with the fact that all human beings have innate dignity. All are God's beloved creatures. No one should be killed or harmed even if they are inflicting harm. Instead they should be loved, overwhelmed with love.

A call to "love our enemies" takes us into the upper reaches of human nature and its capabilities -- the upper reaches transformed by grace and the power of God.

Love of enemy includes political enemies.

Some hear Jesus' teaching and take it to mean *personal* enemies and that it does not apply to enemies in other countries or ethnic groups. They understand therefore that it has nothing to do with politics. It is only about interpersonal dealings. However, the Gospel of Luke, in particular, makes clear that the teaching applies to any and all who are perceived as enemy and therefore is eminently political. The Gospel of Luke deepens our understanding of just what Jesus means by this radical demand.

Luke highlights one group in particular that was perceived by contemporary Jews as their enemy—the Samaritans. The beginning of antipathy towards the Samaritans goes back centuries. It originates with the conquering of the Northern kingdom by Assyria in 722 B.C.E. Many inhabitants of the Northern kingdom were transported to Assyria but quite a few in the middle kingdom of Samaria were left behind and were thought to have intermingled with gentiles over the years. Whilst Samaritans were generally understood more broadly as Israelites (albeit of mixed heritage), there were long standing religious tensions regarding scripture, temple location (the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim) and priesthood. The antipathy grew even more intense during the period of Hasmonean kings. In his expansive wars of conquest John Hyrcanus (134-104 B.C.E.) burned the temple on Mount Gerizim and totally destroyed the Samaritan city of Shechem.

Luke tells us that Jesus travels through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem; this is in itself notable as such a route would typically have been avoided by Jews, and aligns with Jesus' deliberate nonviolent inclusiveness. Jesus experiences the antipathy of the Samaritans towards the Jews just as he has begun his trek to Jerusalem.

“As the time drew near when Jesus would be taken up to heaven, he made up his mind and set out on his way to Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead of him, who went into a village in Samaria to get everything ready for him. But the people there would not receive him, because it was clear that he was on his way to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51-53.)

Just to be on the way to Jerusalem was enough to be shut out by the Samaritans. Even more clearly does the latent violent antipathy between the peoples emerge from the reaction of his disciples, James and John.

“When the disciples James and John saw this, they said: ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them? Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then Jesus and his disciples went on to another village.” (Luke 9: 54-56.)

Jesus rebuked them. Violence is to have no place in their practice or in their hearts. All this time they had been with him, seen his example and heard his teachings and they still instinctively turned to violence as the ready response to an offense.

In the next chapter, Chapter 10, Jesus, still on his journey to Jerusalem, in response to a teacher of the law who is trying to trap him, tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. The teacher of the law has asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus describes a man severely beaten by robbers and left half dead whom a priest and a Levite had noticed and walked on by. He then describes “a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him his heart was filled with pity. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds, bandaged them; and then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. Take care of him,’ he told the innkeeper, ‘and when I come back this way I will pay you whatever else you spend on him.” And Jesus concluded, “In your opinion, which one of these acted like a neighbor toward the man attacked by robbers?” The teacher of the law answered: “The one who showed him mercy.” (Luke 10: 33-37.)

The conjunction of the words “Samaritan” and “neighbor” shattered all conventions. Jesus challenged viewing the Samaritans--and indeed any group--as enemy and the deeper issue of dividing people into outsiders and insiders.

In Chapter 17:11 Luke writes: “As Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, he went along the border between Samaria and Galilee” emphasizing again his location in Samaria. He came upon ten men suffering from a dreaded skin disease. He healed them and then the text describes that only one returned to him thanking him and “glorifying God in a loud voice.” (Luke 17:15). That one was a Samaritan, an *allogenes*, an outsider, and popularly perceived as an enemy.

Luke makes clear that the category of enemy refers to everyone who is typically seen as *allogenes*--not our kind, outsiders, those who threaten us, those who are “other.” He is communicating that Jesus does away with those categories. All are to be embraced as our brothers and sisters if we are to be sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Wars begin in the minds of human beings. Not seeing others as *allogenes* puts us on the path to peace.

A surprising gift awaits people who practice love of enemies; so-called enemies often have important lessons to teach us when we are open to them. For example, when Jesus engages the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) in honest dialogue, it leads to respect, reconciliation and communion. When he listened to the entreaties of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) to heal her daughter, he was awed by her faith and did what he had not planned on doing. Both

model nonviolence: the woman acts on behalf of her daughter—the most vulnerable in society, and Jesus, who engages with her, really listens and is changed.

Luke goes even further to illuminate Jesus' teaching on love of enemies. Even more resented, if not hated, by his people are members of the occupying army of imperial Rome. Luke, however, describes three instances in which leaders in the army of Rome, centurions, are held up for admiration if not emulation. The first example is in Capernaum, when a centurion sent some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal a beloved servant who was very ill. The elders recommended him highly to Jesus explaining that he showed love for the Jewish people and had even built a synagogue for them. Jesus healed the servant and commended the centurion for his faith. (Luke 7:2-10). The second example Luke describes is a centurion at the foot of the cross who, just after Jesus gave up his spirit, acknowledged the hand of God and proclaimed that Jesus was indeed an upright man (according to Luke's version) (Luke 23:47). The third example is from the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke (Acts 27:1-28:16). A centurion, Julius, was given the responsibility of delivering Paul to the authorities in Rome. Luke describes Julius' great kindness to Paul. At one point in the tortuous journey Julius prevented the shipwrecked sailors from killing Paul and the other prisoners.

No one is beyond the pale of the nonviolent love of Jesus and later of his disciples. All—gentiles, Samaritans, Romans, even those who mocked and scourged Jesus—are their brothers and sisters. All are the sons and daughters of their Father. None should be killed or harmed by Jesus' followers. They are to be loved, overwhelmed by love. Jesus' teaching on nonviolent resistance is much more than mere pacifism which requires only that we refuse to harm or kill our enemies. It invites us to love them—and show that love through active resistance and outreach.

As Martin Luther King said: "Love of our enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of the world."²

But surely this is an impossible ideal. How can weak human beings live this way in a world full of conflict? The answer is that Jesus' teaching does not end there. He insists that "Love of Enemy" is the right stance. It is the right posture that makes us like his Father. But he does more than get us in the right posture. He gives us a set of proactive practices that make love of enemy practical. But another section of the Sermon on the Mount, the verses just before the teaching on "Love of Enemies" shows us how we can make the revolution a reality. Jesus' reading of the scriptures brought him to the realization of just how powerful and steadfast and nonviolent his God is. Further reading and study and reflection on his people's experiences brought him to understand the power of nonviolent direct action.

² Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981) p. 48.

2. *Jesus taught and showed how to **intervene** and break the cycle of violence before it gets out of hand by using, “transforming initiatives,” creative, nonviolent direct action.*

Matthew 5: 38-42: “You have heard it said ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ I say to you, do not return violence for violence. Instead, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him your left. If someone presses you to go one mile, go a second mile. If someone takes your tunic, give him your cloak as well.”

Too often in the history of Christianity, this passage has been wrongly seen as a teaching of passivity in the face of evil. When correctly understood it is just the opposite. It is a teaching on how to assertively, creatively resist evil and oppression without becoming like the oppressor. It makes “love of enemies” practical and doable.

Consider each of the verses in turn. “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus is citing the Scriptural tradition on how to respond to hurt and violence. Even the score but only equally, tit for tat, as part of a law designed to prevent the escalation of violence. It had been a big advance over an earlier mindset of “if someone takes your eye, take their body”—i.e. respond with increasing or overwhelming violence and teach their whole community a lesson they would not forget.

The second verse: “I say to you, do not respond with violence for violence.” The verb *antistēnai* has frequently and unfortunately been translated as “do not resist”—accentuating the interpretation that Jesus is teaching us to be doormats in the face of evil—totally contrary to the way he himself acts. The verb *anti stēnai* means, literally, “stand against.” Throughout the Bible standing against means standing militarily against an opponent. The verse is better translated as “do not respond to evil with evil,” or “do not respond violently to evil done to you.”

Consider the next three verses first as a whole. They each describe a harm done to someone, fairly common harms that could have happened to anyone listening to Jesus. As tightly drawn examples in a series, they prompt the listener to think of more examples.

The first example, of someone striking another across the right cheek describes someone backhanding another with a demeaning slap. (It is taboo in the culture to use the left hand in such a situation) The right cheek can only be reached by someone’s right hand with a backhanded blow. Jesus is most likely describing someone in a superior position, a slave owner to a slave, an abusive husband to his wife, dealing a demeaning blow to a perceived inferior. How to respond? The expected reaction might be to cower or to swallow the insult to avoid more blows. Jesus says instead, to turn the other cheek—be willing to risk a fist to the face.

Imagine someone on the receiving end of an insulting backhanded blow, looking at the abuser in the face, communicating not only that he is not cowed but also calmly calling the abuser to rethink his behavior as beneath himself or herself.

Such an action is not only not passivity, it is creative nonviolent direct action designed to surprise the opponent and invite a change in behavior.

The second example describes a situation in which one person is taking another's tunic, the garment under the cloak, as a pledge in a lawsuit. (Jewish law, as a protection for the destitute and to avoid risk of death from exposure, forbade taking the heavy outer garment or cloak of another, unless to use as a pledge for a loan, in which it had to be returned every evening because it is what an impoverished person uses to sleep in overnight.) Jesus describes the poor person, reduced to destitution by law proceedings, taking off the cloak, or undergarment as well, in effect stripping naked as a protest to the entire proceeding. The poor person may be destitute but maintains the ability to take the initiative and graphically communicate the injustice of the situation.

The third example describes the custom of *angareia* whereby occupying soldiers may at any time press subject peoples and/or their pack animals into service to carry their heavy packs. The soldier may perceive the Jewish civilian as nothing better than a pack animal. Imagine his surprise when that person surprises him with an independent spirit, takes the initiative and marches on for another mile. Occupied, perhaps, but still in a real way, free.

Jesus is teaching a new way—not fight, flight or accommodate-- but wield nonviolent power designed to remove fear from within the ones wielding it, remove perceptions of inferiority and break through the enmity.

Note how the passage of Matthew 5:38-42 is structured. It is the same for all 14 triads that make up the Sermon on the Mount. First Jesus states the accepted, customary standard of action in simple declarative sentences. In this case, “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” etc. Then he states what not to do, what gets people into an increasingly negative cycle and bind. In this case, “don’t respond to evil with evil.” Then finally imperative verbs, actions that can be taken to get out of the cycle of violence: Turn, give, go a second mile; go well beyond what the conventional wisdom would have you do. This is what St. Paul will call surpassing righteousness—daring, life-affirming actions in the face of evil.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples. The rest of the crowd is gathered round and overhearing Jesus’ words. Jesus is calling his disciples to his way of life, the way of nonviolence. They in turn will demonstrate that way of life to the people and encourage

them to follow as well. It is not, as some will later term it, an impossible ideal. It is the hallmark of discipleship. Following that way of life, a life of nonviolent, creative love, is possible because of the gift of grace and love from the Father. As we read in Luke: "For He himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." (Luke 6:35). It is to live in the free, bracing air of the kingdom of God.

Jesus formulates these practical approaches that move humanity well beyond the eye for an eye tradition which had been accepted wisdom for centuries not just by his creative reading of oral and written tradition. Recent events in the political world would have informed his embrace of nonviolent direct action. Jesus did not invent nonviolent direct action. His own people were practicing it. Josephus informs us that the Jewish people had, in addition to violent resistance, tried nonviolent resistance as well.

A well-known example of nonviolent resistance was prompted by two famous teachers in Herod's time, 4 BCE, Judas and Matthias and their students. Herod had erected a large golden eagle, the key symbol of the Roman army, over the great gate of the Temple. Forty young students went up and chopped it down. The event was deliberately planned. The event was aggressive and bold in defiance of Herod and his practices of collaboration with Rome. Yet they did not offer any armed resistance to the military force sent to apprehend them but courageously waited for the attack. Herod had them and their teachers burned alive.

Another celebrated example was against Pilate in Jesus' time, 26 BCE. Pilate had introduced into Jerusalem at night images of Caesar attached to the army's standards. A multitude of people went to Caesarea to implore him to remove the standards. Josephus writes:

"When Pilate refused them, they fell down prostrate on the ground and continued immovable in that posture for five days and as many nights. On the next day Pilate sat on his tribunal, in the open marketplace, and called to him the multitude, as desirous of giving them an answer and then gave a signal to the soldiers, that they should all by agreement at once encompass the Jews with their weapons, so the band of soldiers stood around about the Jews in three ranks. The Jews were under the utmost consternation at that sight. Pilate also said to them that they should be cut to pieces, unless they would admit of Caesar's images, and gave intimation to the soldiers to draw their naked swords. Hereupon the Jews, as it were on one signal, fell down in vast numbers together, and exposed their necks bare, and cried out that they were sooner ready to be slain, than their law should be transgressed. Hereupon Pilate was greatly surprised at their prodigious superstition and gave the order that the ensigns should be presently carried out of Jerusalem."³

³ Josephus, *War of the Jews*, Book 2, Chapter 9.

In the face of imminent violence and bloodshed the Jewish people courageously stood their ground. They refused to cooperate in the evil. They also remained completely nonviolent and nonthreatening to Pilate. Pilate was amazed at and admired their courage. They appealed to the better angels of his nature and succeeded in reaching him with their common humanity. This was classic nonviolent direct action.

Nonviolent direct action was alive and well in Jesus' time. He recognized it as a powerful alternative to violence. He not only taught it to his disciples, he practiced it. The best way to understand the *teaching* of Jesus is to observe Jesus' *life*, the way he *practices* nonviolent direct action.

*3. Jesus uses the power of **nonviolent direct action** to resist the **structural causes of injustice** and suffering in his society*

Jesus not only taught nonviolent direct action, he used it himself. He utilized the methods of nonviolent direct action to resist and overcome the structural violence that was baked into his society. Structural evil extends beyond the evil that people do; it extends to institutions and cultural norms that harden injustices in place. The main pillars of daily life for most Jews were Torah, Sabbath and Temple. But the role of, and traditions associated with, these institutions were already subject to debate and conflict in first century Palestinian Judaism. Many shared Jesus' view that these institutions were being controlled by the elites for their own social and economic interests, to the detriment of the majority, particularly the poor and marginalized.

The seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, was the day when the creator himself looked at his creation and pronounced it good and then rested. It was intended by God to be such a day for his people, a day of rest and rejuvenation. Instead, through complicated interpretations it risked becoming a day for the authorities to pronounce judgments on people, and place unnecessary restrictions on them.

Mark's gospel, Chapter 3: 1-6, describes Jesus entering a synagogue and encountering a man with a withered arm. Some people present were intent on seeing Jesus do something to violate the Sabbath. Jesus did not ignore or shy away from the potential conflict. He called the man up to the front and asked the people: "What does our law allow us to do on the Sabbath? To help or harm? To save a man's life or to destroy it?" No one replied. Mark describes Jesus as angry as he looked around but at the same time sad for those who opposed him because they were so stubborn and wrong. Then he said to the man: "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and it was healed. Mark says the Pharisees left the synagogue and met with some members of Herod's party and they made plans to kill Jesus. (Mark 3:6).

The Sabbath was a day for celebrating release from slavery and bondage as well as from work. It was an appropriate day for healing. Jesus stood up to the Pharisees and members of the Herodian party who opposed him. He performed a “work” of mercy and compassion consistent with the purpose of the Sabbath. As a result he risked censure and even death at their hands. His public life had barely started and already he had become a marked man.

Another striking example of Jesus’ resistance to the powers is described in Luke, Chapter 13. Jesus interrupts the Sabbath service, notices a woman who is bent, and has been bent for 18 years. He feels compassion for her, calls her forward, puts his hands on her and at once she straightened up, praising God. He then defends his action in a very strong challenge to the synagogue leaders: “You hypocrites! Which of you would not let out your ox or your ass on the Sabbath to water it? And should this daughter of Abraham who has been in bondage for 18 years, should she not be released, freed from her shackles on the Sabbath?” Luke goes on to write that all the people rejoiced at what he had done.

In the same way there was debate and a number of rules within first century Judaism regarding ritual purity laws, and notions of inclusion and exclusion – in particular in relation to the Temple (understood as God’s house). These included elements of one’s type of work, family, behavior, contact with animals and physical health. What is clear from Jesus’ ministry, activity, teaching, and social interaction including table fellowship, is that he aims to challenge such conceptual boundaries and to disregard them in his behavior. He explained his stance. “It is not what goes into a man that condemns him but what comes out of him.” (Mark 7:15)

He vigorously contested the way the scribes were interpreting the Torah. He took his stance on the teaching of Isaiah that the Jewish religion was to be the light for the nations. (Isaiah 2:2-4). He based his stance on Abraham, the father of all the nations, who was to mediate the divine blessings to all the nations of the earth. He had come to fulfill the law and the prophets, not do away with them, and it pained him that so many were being excluded from the kingdom of God over notions of purity and impurity. He believed that holiness was not staying pure but showing compassion. He gave sight to the blind man and thus allowed him to worship in the Temple. So also with the lame man and the woman who suffered from the flow of blood, making her impure. He touched the leper instead of abiding by a fear of impurity. After healing the leper he sent him to the priest for a judgment of cleanliness to make sure he could rejoin the community of faith. He acted in a straightforward, nonviolent way to undercut misguided authority. Everywhere he went he counseled the people to not be afraid. “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” (John 14:27).

After working to renew their communities across the length and breadth of Galilee, healing and gathering people into renewed communities, he decided to deal not just with the presenting problems but to turn his attention to the underlying causalities. He set his face to Jerusalem. Jesus chose to oppose and challenge the way the Temple was being run. He had a gift for choosing actions that struck people forcefully and memorably. He chose actions that spoke his message even more clearly than his words—symbolic and prophetic actions. On his way to Jerusalem, near Bethphage and Bethany, he sent two of his disciples to the village opposite to untie a young donkey which he then rode into the city. He rode the donkey over the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron valley, and up to the Temple mount—the action spoke louder than words that his was a royal claim, a new kingdom, a new kind of king, who exerted power without violence. The movement intentionally fulfilled the passage of Zechariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout loud Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” (Zech. 9:9-10)

This was a counter symbol to Pilate who at the same time was entering Jerusalem on his war horse. As Benedict XVI wrote: “But even in Zechariah’s day, and still more by the time of Jesus, it was the horse that had come to signify the might of the mighty, while the donkey has become the animal of the poor.”⁴ The oracle of Zechariah describes a new kind of king, one of nonviolence who bans war horses and chariots and battle bows, brings peace to humanity, and ends war.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus then entered the Temple and performed another action charged with meaning. Mark wrote:

“Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the Temple. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple. And he taught and said to them: ‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of thieves’.” (Mark 11 15-17)

Jesus defends his bold action in the Jerusalem Temple by citing two prophetic traditions that articulated his own double critique of this Institution under Roman occupation. He appeals to

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 16.

Isaiah 56:3-8 to remind the leaders that the Temple was meant to be the city on the hill whose light would reach all nations. And he adds an allusion to Jeremiah 7:1-14 (itself delivered from the gate of the Temple), which censured the nation's stewards who used the cult to exploit and profit off of the people, warning against relying on ritual purity if accompanied by social injustice. Jesus was passionately dedicated to the wellbeing of the poor, and stood against the political economy of the Temple when it siphoned off the resources of vulnerable people into the purses of some of the priests and elites (as illustrated by his lament over the "widow's mite," Mark 12:40-44). His action in the Temple is the culmination of Jesus' life-long obedience to God and civil resistance to imperial and religious injustice. It triggered the violence of the powers and the Empire to come down on him.

To this point we have seen a few different sides of Jesus' nonviolence. We have seen him use nonviolence to confront the human tendency to tar those who are different from us as *allogenes*, outcasts and enemies, removing one of the main triggers of violence from peoples' minds. This is *preventive* peacemaking--before the violence starts cascading down. We have seen him teach his disciples how to cut the ground from under the tendency to respond to violence with violence; to respond to violence and aggression by meeting it with creative nonviolence. This is *intervention* peacemaking—interrupt the cycle of revenge and violence before it can really get going. We have seen how he uses nonviolent direct action to address and change the underlying causes of violence. He knows that a peacemaker sometimes has to be first a peace disturber. The problems afflicting people have to be brought out into the open and those in power have to be shaken out of their complacency before the problems can be resolved. Not just Jesus but also Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Wangari Muta Maathai (Nobel '04), Martin Luther King, Leymah Gbowee (Nobel peace prize 2011), and Hildegaard and Jean Goss-Mayr were first seen as peace-disturbers before they were recognized as peace-makers.

When people are feeling unjustly treated, when they feel like outcasts in their own homes, when they have been deprived of the means of caring for themselves and their families, anger is bound to fester and fester until it erupts in violence. Jesus tried to heal festering wounds such as these. This is *civil resistance* peacemaking--addressing the structures of violence embedded in a society, exposing them, disturbing those responsible and rallying a tidal wave of positive alternatives. He could see the future, that if his people let the anger continue to build and they exploded with wrath, the power of Rome would descend on them like a sledgehammer. We have seen him try to reach those who were causing the injustices. He galvanized the power of the people and used powerful symbolic, prophetic action to try and break through to the powers.

Finally, the gospels instruct us in a nonviolent approach to bringing about reconciliation and healing *after the harm has been done*, after the injustice has been committed. This is *reconciling* peacemaking.

4. Jesus teaches and practices a nonviolent way to reconcile victims and offenders and heal a community

Jesus, faithful to the Biblical tradition that cares less about punishment for the offender and more on gaining restitution for the victim, gives his followers an alternative process from the rabbinic or Roman law courts for pursuing justice -- restorative justice instead of retributive justice. His approach centers first on the victim of violation and then on the offender. It assumes that a crime is not just a violation of law but more importantly a violation of a person. It sees that justice is secured only when the offender holds himself/herself accountable *and* victim and offender are reconciled. The teaching is found in Matthew's gospel, Chapter 18.

"If your brother or sister has sinned against you, arise and point out the fault when the two of you are in private, and if they listen to you, you have won your brother or sister. If you are not listened to, take with you one or two others so that the case may be decided through the evidence of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen to them, tell it to the congregation. But if they do not listen to the congregation, then regard such a one as a Gentile or a tax collector." (Matthew 18: 15-17).

Note first the emphasis on the victim. In a typical retributive justice system the emphasis is all on the offender—proving their guilt and assigning an appropriate punishment. It is assumed that punishing the offender makes the victim whole. Not much attention is paid to the wounds the victim may have endured from the assault or the offense. The victim's pain deserves attention. Furthermore, in this approach agency is given to the victim. It assumes that the victim has power and authority—as long as they are ready to take the initiative and will not be revictimized by the offender.

The key line of the passage is: "Arise, and confront the one who has sinned against you". In the typical retributive justice system the offender may never really hear or understand what their offense has done to the victim. In the restorative justice system the offender is fully confronted with the totality of what they have done. This first step, if successful, helps the offender save face through a private approach. Without the shaming dynamic that comes from the presence of peers, the offender may be able to respond more sincerely. Through negotiation the parties work things out themselves. The goal is to regain the offender if they listen and take full responsibility. If they do so, the victim will know that he or she has been fully heard and understood.

If the offender is not, however, won over, the violated party can pursue a series of steps that steadily increase community pressure on the offender. The first recourse is to bring along one or two witnesses. If the offender still refuses to listen then bring to bear the entire community in loving, but firm nonviolent coercion.

More recent experiments with “healing circles” and “community justice conferencing” confirm the effectiveness of these restorative justice practices. Often the peer pressure of family, neighbors, colleagues and other stakeholders provides the needed push to a stubborn offender and opens the way to a productive discussion concerning a path forward for the victim and offender and appropriate recompense from the offender.

In the worst case scenario, the offender dismisses the pain of the victim and the testimony of the community. In that case, the “lost sheep” does not want to be found and has made himself or herself an outsider and not responsible to the community. Treating the offender then as a “Gentile or tax collector” is not necessarily punitive. It is recognizing that a different approach to engaging with the offender is required. Jesus was called a “friend” of tax collectors and sinners; the community reengages with the offender in the same way Jesus engaged with the socially excluded—reaching out to them and proclaiming the good news to them anew.

The saying in verse 20 of Chapter 18, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them” is significant. In the difficult and challenging redemptive process of supporting victims to take moral initiative, and holding offenders accountable, for the health of the whole discipleship community—Jesus will be “in our midst.”

In this way Jesus teaches us still another facet and kind of peacemaking. This is “*after the harm has been done*” peacemaking. The aim is to nonviolently renew, rebuild and strengthen the community through reconciliation.

An even surer way to rebuild, renew and strengthen the community is through the daily practice of forgiveness.

Forgiveness and restorative justice

Just after Jesus’ teaching on victim/offender reconciliation, Peter asks an important follow-up question:

“Then Peter went up to him and said: ‘Lord how often must I forgive my brother or sister if they wrong me? As often as seven times?’ Jesus answered: ‘Not seven, I tell you, but 70 times seven.’” (Matthew 18: 21.).

Jesus in teaching us the prayer “Our Father” points out that forgiveness is two-sided. It is a gift before it is a task and failure to forgive nullifies the benefits of God’s forgiveness: “forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.”

It does not ignore or overlook evil. It begins by explicitly naming and confronting evil—and then meeting it with unconditional love. Successful Truth and Reconciliation commissions begin with the recitation of the crimes done to real, individual persons, followed by admittance of the crimes by the perpetrators, bringing into light of day not only the fact of the acts but also public recognition of the psychic wounds that continue to afflict those who suffered. The people harmed have the opportunity to emerge from their grief, and if they can find it in their hearts to forgive, to start again with those who have perpetrated the violence.

Hannah Arendt, the famous Jewish political philosopher, has suggested that forgiveness is a political initiative that she attributes to Jesus and the only response to violence that ends the chain of reciprocal recriminations from revenge. It refuses to play that game and instead cancels it.⁵

Jesus’ teaching that disciples should forgive 70 times seven is the mirror reverse of Lamech’s claim in Genesis that he would exercise revenge 70 times seven. (Gen. 4: 23-24). Forgiveness breaks the cycle, looks at the perpetrator in a new way and restores the offender to good standing. It is a supremely free and creative act.

Jesus’ words on the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” sum up this packed teaching on forgiveness. Jesus at one and the same time shed any trace of blame and hatred from his spirit, kept his followers away from retribution and maintained the perpetrators to be true children of God.

In all these instances and types of peacemaking: *preventive* peacemaking, *intervention* peacemaking, *civil resistance* peacemaking and “*after the harm has been done*” peacemaking, Jesus is acting in the political/public sphere. The following example shows how he used nonviolence in the personal sphere.

5. Jesus demonstrated how to defend the innocent nonviolently—How to personally confront murderous violence with nonviolence

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 1958) 238-242.

A common way people dismiss the legitimacy of nonviolence is by asking a person who believes in nonviolence the following question: “But what would you do if a loved one was being threatened with violence? To stand by and do nothing makes the passive observer worse than the one threatening the violence, does it not?”

The assumption behind the question, of course, is that the only way to protect someone threatened with violence is with intervening violence.

On at least one occasion Jesus walked right into a situation of horrific threatened violence. A mob of men stood armed with stones ready to stone to death a woman whom they had caught in an act of adultery. They felt completely righteous—they felt their own law commanded them to act. They said to Jesus:

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In our law, Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death. Now, what do you say?” (John 8:4-5)

First note the courage of Jesus. He did not shrink away from the scene; he walked right into the middle of it. Then, note his coolness under fire. Then notice his creativity. One does not respond in such a situation with nonviolent creativity unless one has practiced so acting—if violence has not been disavowed consistently. He did not use superior force to overcome their violence. He did not threaten. He bent down in front of them and began silently writing something in the dust—a classic diversion of attention move. We don’t know what he wrote, and it does not seem to matter. He let the situation cool, put them back on themselves. John’s gospel says that he then stood up. He must have looked at them but probably not in a condemnatory or angry way—that would have further inflamed the situation. Probably a composed, benign face. He then put them back on their heels with a simple statement of truth:

“The one among you without sin, cast the first stone.” (John 8:7)

Then he bent over again and resumed writing. He did not intensify the standoff by staring at them or challenging them. Instead he let his words sink in. John wrote:

“They all left one by one, the older ones first.” (John 8: 9)

The younger ones’ hyped-up energy evidently took a little longer to cool.

John’s gospel gives us a classic picture of nonviolent action at work in the teeth of a threat of violence and resolving the violence. It is our own Divine savior—fully human, in action. Since

then faithful Christians and countless others have shown how we can confront violence and overcome it without violence. People have shown it in the personal sphere. They have shown it time and time again in the political sphere. It is a myth that the only way you can stop a gun is with a person who has a bigger gun. That approach usually leads to escalation. The cycle of violence is real and a deadly no exit. As Pope Francis pointed out in an Angelus address in 2013: “War brings on war! Violence brings on violence.”

*6. He taught us how **build a culture** of nonviolent service*

When Matthew, Luke and John wrote their gospels the revolt against Rome had already happened (66 to 70 CE) and Rome had already unleashed its whirlwind of violence. The Jewish revolt had been totally crushed, 500 a day crucified, the Temple demolished, the scaffolding up the mountain towards the fortress Masada had been constructed and the last holdout rebels had perished. Mark was perhaps written before the other three gospels, perhaps just as the revolt was beginning or perhaps just after the destruction of the Temple. The readers of the Gospels therefore knew Roman domination well. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Rome, under Vespasian, instituted a tax that would go towards the maintenance of a pagan shrine placed on the site of the ruined Temple. Rome issued a coin called “Judea Capta” meaning “Judea captured and supine” which pictured a Roman soldier brandishing a spear over a kneeling female. The early readers of the Gospels knew well how Rome lorded it over subject peoples and kept them craven.

The gospels therefore, looking back, portray Jesus as quite prescient about what Rome represented and the threat that was looming if the cycle of violence escalated on both sides. In his mind’s eye he could see the destruction that was coming, was deeply moved by the anguish that was coming to his people and lamented their failure to follow his way of peace. Luke wrote:

“When Jesus came within sight of the city, he wept over it, and said: ‘If only you had known the ways of peace! But now your eyes are held from seeing. Yet the days will come when your enemies will come upon you with barricades and shut you in and press on you from every side. And they will dash you to the ground and your children with you, and leave not a stone within you, for you did not recognize the time and the visitation of your God.’” (Luke 19: 41-44)

But the Gospels, especially Mark, are equally clear that Jesus presented to his followers a way that would be a complete antithesis to Rome’s way of threat and domination. He called them to form a counter-community of nonviolence and service. Mark wrote:

“As you know, the so-called rulers of the nations act as tyrants and lord it over them. But it shall not be so among you; whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you shall make himself a slave to all. For the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life to redeem many.” (Mark 10: 42-45)

He put a child into their midst, the least powerful figure in their culture, with no rights, and he said that they were to live as children—recognizing their littleness but also their great power for good and for others. He treated women, another group with few rights and little power, in ways distinctly different from the way his society treated them. After his resurrection he even sent Mary Magdalen as his witness to the male disciples. (John 20:11-18). All, even those with little standing in his society, were included in his circle and in his ministry.

On the night he was betrayed he called them together to give them additional lessons on how to build a nonviolent community that would serve as an antithesis to Rome and successive imperial powers. He highlighted the absolute necessity of building a community of compassion and nonviolent service. He understood that no one can be nonviolent in splendid isolation. We need others to model for us nonviolent behavior. We need colleagues in the nonviolent fight to pick us up when we get discouraged. We need a community to remind us of the way that Jesus showed us.

In John’s Gospel, he then modeled for them one more time how he wanted them to live. He, their Master, got down on the floor with a container of water and some towels and began to wash their feet, removing the dust from their feet and sandals. He said:

“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I, then, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, you also must wash one another’s feet. I have just given you an example that as I have done, you also may do.” (John 13: 12-15.)

For all those reasons he called them together to give them and us a memorial of his nonviolent way. He took bread, broke it, blessed it and gave it to them saying, “Take and eat; this is my body given up for you.” (Luke 22: 19) He did the same with the cup of wine and then said, “Do this in memory of me.” Whenever you come together and share my body and blood, you are to remember my life, how I acted. Act as you have seen me act—resist structures of violence, show people how to return love for hate, spurn arms, show compassion for the poor and the outcasts, be willing to endure pain and suffering for my sake. Lean on one another. His model of inclusive, nonviolent community building meant breaking bread and sharing the cup with even his betrayer, “The hand of my betrayer is with me at this table.” (Luke 22:21).

He then got up from the table and led them out to do the other key action for building a nonviolent culture. They went out to pray. At all the key moments of Jesus' public life he felt the need to take his community off by themselves to pray—to stay in constant communion with the God who loves all, to keep fresh and alive the spirit that enlivens all. It was to prayer that he turned on this night of threat and coming violence.

7. Jesus showed us how to live a life of nonviolent love to the full and to the end

Jesus spent much of the evening before his arrest in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew what was building against him and he was in great distress. In Mark's description we have here the only time in Mark that Jesus calls his Father, Abba:

"My soul is sorrowful even unto death...Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me, but not what I will but what you will." (Mark 14:33, 36).

He was terrified at what might be coming. Luke wrote:

"As he was in agony, he prayed even more earnestly and great drops of blood formed like sweat and fell to the ground." (Luke 22: 44).

He is afraid—with good reason. Rome loomed on his horizon.

The depth of his prayer in the Garden prepared him to face what was coming. (Luke wrote that an angel came to strengthen in him in his agony.) (Luke 24. 43). He got up and went forward to meet his fate. Judas, his friend and betrayer, went directly up to him and gave him a kiss so that those sent to arrest him would know which one was Jesus. In each of the Gospel versions Jesus responded with nonviolence and sorrowful resignation. Matthew wrote that Jesus responded: "Friend, do what you came for." (Matthew 26: 50). Jesus called the one who betrayed him "friend," still not excising him from the book of life.

The disciples accompanying him were afraid. One of them, identified in John's gospel as Peter, drew a sword and hacked at the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus' response was immediate. According to Matthew's gospel he said:

"Put your sword back in its sheath. All who take the sword will die by the sword. Do you not know that I could call on my Father, and he would at once send 12 legions of angels?" (Matthew 26: 52-53).

If ever there was a time when using violence to defend an innocent person would seem to be justified, it would be at this moment—but Jesus sees it differently. He knows what violence does. It produces more violence. He has consistently opted for a better way and he does so here. He confronted violence with the unarmed power of truth and love. According to Luke's gospel Jesus said: "Enough of this." (Luke 22:51) and then Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him. These are his last words to the disciples before his death. "Enough of this" and "Put away the sword." At this pivotal moment he rejected the violence option and chose nonviolence. He expected his followers, once they saw how he behaved in these climactic moments, to do the same.

He was then handed over, first to the high priest and the Sanhedrin. As the trial scenes unfold, Jesus continues to respond forthrightly and with dignity. When a soldier feels free to slap him for the way Jesus answered the high priest, Jesus responded calmly but assertively,

"If there is some offense in what I said, point it out; but if not, why do you strike me"? (John 18:23).

He was then handed over to Pilate, who alone, as the official representative of the empire, had the power over life and death. In his response to Pilate he made it clear that he was a king but a different kind of king, one who rejected the tired power of the sword to intimidate and dominate. John wrote that Jesus said to Pilate:

"My kingship does not come from this world. If I were a king like those of this world, my followers would have fought to save me from being handed over to the Jews." (John 18:36).

Pilate then handed him over to the soldiers. The full, ugly power of the empire was unleashed on him. That power was meant to intimidate and control. Matthew says the whole cohort of soldiers, hundreds of soldiers, surrounded him. They scourged him, beat him, spat on him, mocked him. He refused to be intimidated. He refused to hate. He refused revenge. He showed them and us how to be human in the face of the greatest inhumanity.

They then led him to the cross—their ultimate tool of humiliation and control.

Jesus' going to the cross is the final action of one who throughout his life acted nonviolently to remove the causes of suffering for his people and stand in resistance to the powers. Jesus constantly risked the hatred, fear and violence of the powers in charge but kept right on going. The cross is the direct result of his ethic of nonviolent resistance and action. The cross cannot be understood apart from his life.

Jesus died because of the way he lived. He died because he confronted the powers of evil and showed us a new way to fight. In so doing he upset the powers-that-be. The cross is a sacred symbol because it stands for a historical life given fully, and to the end, for the liberation of humankind through nonviolent power.

As Pope Francis has written elsewhere: “My Christian faith urges me to look to the cross...Violence is not answered with the language of death. In the silence of the cross, the uproar of weapons ceases and the language of reconciliation, forgiveness, dialogue and peace is spoken.”⁶

There is no word of Jesus more often repeated in the gospels than his words urging his disciples to follow him along the road to the cross. e.g. Matt. 10:38, 16:24, Mark 8:34, 10:31 Luke 9:23, 14:27. He is really saying to them and to us to follow his way of life even at the risk of such barbaric suffering and with the risk of our entire life’s work coming to, apparently, nothing. To imitate the cross is to accept suffering rather than deny the truth. To imitate the cross is to be loyal to the life practice of nonviolent, redemptive love.

The Risen Jesus shares nonviolent love

The disciples, in fear, had run away when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Most of the resurrection accounts begin with fear. When the risen Jesus first appears to his friends, they are hiding behind locked doors, fearing for their lives, utterly shaken by their loss. He appears to them and there is no note of recrimination, no reproof, no anger at their abandonment of him. Jesus shows them what he has always shown them—unfathomable love, the same love that he shares with his Abba. He says to them, “Peace be with you.” What begins with fear, is transformed into a moment of great joy. John wrote:

“On the evening of the first day of the week, when the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.’ As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20: 19-23).

Jesus commissioned his disciples, and through them, us, to continue his work of building the kingdom. At the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples that they would do greater things than he had done. He dared to leave the work of building the kingdom of heaven to a small group of

⁶ Pope Francis, Vigil of Prayer for Peace in Syria, September 7, 2013.

fallible human beings. John's Jesus deliberately connected resurrection with peace, a peace that does not deny Jesus' agony and death. The risen one gives us peace as we take up our cross-- as we follow in his footsteps. He stood against structures of oppression. He bound up peoples' wounds. He gathered people in banquet and celebration. He used the power of nonviolent action to build the kingdom of God. As we follow his way, we too will glimpse the joy of the resurrection.

In summary, the Gospels show us Jesus as a **full spectrum nonviolent peacemaker**. Jesus teaches us how to *prevent* violence before it gets started, by refusing to treat anyone as an outsider or enemy. He teaches how to *intervene* with creative, disarming nonviolent action when things are getting hot, breaking the cycle of violence. He demonstrates *civil resistance* peacemaking, attacking structural violence, bringing it into the open, using nonviolent power to change the equation. He demonstrates *after-the-harm-has-been-done* peacemaking--how to nonviolently reconcile parties who have been estranged. He shows how to neutralize personal violence and *protect the innocent* with the power of creative nonviolent action. He calls us to form a *community of nonviolent service* that will be an antithesis to regimes of domination through violence. Finally, he shows us how to live a *life of nonviolence to the full* and to the end.

In conclusion,

Beyond the testimony of the Gospels we have the life witness of the disciples after his resurrection and ascension. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes how the early disciples lived out Jesus' nonviolent style of life—reaching out without fear to all, healing, rejoicing and building the kingdom. Luke wrote: “As the apostles left the Council, they were happy, because God had considered them worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of Jesus. And every day in the Temple and in peoples' homes they continued to teach and preach the Good News about Jesus the Messiah.” (Acts 5:41-42). With men and women sharing leadership, they met for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously. People from all cultures were welcomed and none were in need: slave and free, Jews and gentiles, landowners and those who were poor.

Many figures of the early Church--Peter, Paul, Tecla, James, Stephen, James, the brother of the Lord, and Perpetua and Felicity, a noble and slave woman who died together -- followed him into suffering and death. All the disciples of the early church understood his call. They understood the risks. They knew where his way of life might lead.

When the call came in 66 C.E. to violently revolt against Rome virtually the whole Jewish community, including leading Pharisees and their followers, joined in. On the contrary, as

Benedict XVI reminds us,⁷ the group of Jews who believed in Jesus, later to be called Christians, in their first major political action, refused the call and fled to Pella, a city across the Jordan. No violence for them; they followed their master.

In addition, the most quoted section of the Bible up until the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. was consistently the Sermon on the Mount teaching of love of enemy. Early Christians believed it. They practiced it.

It is a blessing that we are reading the Gospels closely again, recovering gospel nonviolence and making it the foundation of our Christian teaching on peace and violence and war. We are walking in the footsteps of our beloved leader.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 24.