**March 4, 2018 – Third Sunday of Lent**

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Did Jesus use violence? Look at the way St. John describes the cleansing of the temple. We are told, Jesus “made a whip out of cords and drove them all out … and spilled the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.” If we define violence as any force that inflicts injury, one might accuse Jesus of using violence! On the other hand, remember that Jesus is called the “prince of peace.” He said things like: “When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other.” “Love you enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you.” “Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.” Which is it? Did Jesus use violence in the temple or are we really supposed to turn the other cheek? The whole Bible is filled with ambivalence about violence. In the Ten Commandments we read, “Thou shalt not kill.” Period. Nothing about thou shalt not kill except in case of war. Or that shalt not kill except in cases of capital punishment. Or thou shalt not kill except in self-defense. Yet we know that the Bible is filled with wars, promotes capital punishment and excuses self-defense. Which is it? A bald “thou shalt not kill” or a lot of “thou shalt not kill excepts?” Besides the violence of our military adventures we find there is the public violence associated with crime and the prevention of crime. We find the family violence of abuse, assault and rape. We find the systemic violence of racism and economic exploitation. We find the stylized violence of movies, TV, music, videos. How can we be faithful to the admittedly mixed message from the Bible and still cure the violence woven into our society?

Happily, this community has a role model who thought deeply about these matters and came up with a resolution which is both faithful to the Bible and responsive to the realities of the times. I’m referring to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King developed an alternative to violence, on the one hand, and inaction or helplessness, on the other. He called it “nonviolent resistance” or “nonviolent action.” If violence is force that inflicts injury, then nonviolence, in Dr. King’s understanding, is force that promotes health, that builds relationships instead of destroying them. Both violence and nonviolence use force. The difference is the nonviolent warrior does not seek to achieve victory, does not seek to impose his will upon an opponent. The nonviolent warrior seeks justice and reconciliation. Dr. King used to stress the one adopts the path of nonviolence first of all to change one’s own heart and soul. Those who adopt nonviolence as a lifestyle gain “a new self-respect and finds resources of strength and courage they did not know they had.” Only then do they reach out to opponents and stir their consciences so that peace and reconciliation become possible. History teaches us that the nonviolent action at the heart of the civil rights movement was an effective tool in producing a more just and peaceful world.

How do we apply those lessons to what we are going through today? How do we confront the violence in our hearts, in our homes, in our schools, on our street corners, in corporate offices, in city hall, and, yes, in Afghanistan? Let’s look more closely at the story of Jesus cleansing the temple to find the lessons of nonviolence that so inspired to Dr. King. First of all, notice that Jesus is not enraged, is not furious when he forces the money changers out of the temple. In the midst of driving out the oxen with a whip of cords and turning over the tables Jesus has enough self-control to pause and say to those who sold doves “take these out of here.” He wasn’t so worked up that he smashed their cages because that would cause irreparable harm when the doves flew away. Instead he got his point across – getting the commerce out of the temple – while not violating the rights of the dove sellers. That tells us that a nonviolent warrior confronts wrong-doing without getting angry or acting in a huff.

A second thing to notice is that Jesus is willing to accept the consequences of his actions. He understands that by confronting the power structure he is putting the “temple of his body” on the line. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” He paid the price on Good Friday. St. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians that the willingness of Jesus to be weak enough to put his life on the line is the heart of the gospel. “We proclaim Christ crucified.” The apostle concludes: “The weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” By forcing change with nonviolence the cycle was broken and chaos was avoided. Instead of producing resentment, nonviolence produced admiration. The strongest weapon a nonviolent warrior wields to conquer his opponent is forgiveness. Think of Jesus praying on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” If we want to eliminate violence in our world, homes, schools and neighborhoods we must learn how to put aside our grudges and the desire to retaliate for wounds received and instead extend compassion and forgiveness.

One final observation: notice the motivation that underlies Jesus’ action. The evangelist quotes the psalmist, “Zeal for your house will consume me,” to express why Jesus did what he did. Zeal, the white heat of God’s love, inspired Jesus. If we are to become nonviolent warriors, to be people who use whatever force, whatever power, we have to promote health, to promote relationships, then we too must be motivated by love. We practice tough love with our family members, not tolerating improper behavior but expecting better, because we love them. We demand our city create safe neighborhoods and productive schools because we love it. We challenge our nation not just to talk about liberty and justice for all but to live it because we love it.