Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Peter Daino

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Whenever today’s gospel advising to turn the other cheek was read to people in remote villages in Malawi, who had never heard this saying before, they burst out laughing. At first this reaction surprised and annoyed me. Then I began to realize how strange this advice truly is. We’ve gotten so used to it that we no longer really hear it. But it is unusual advice: “Look, here is what you do if someone slugs you in the jaw, pull up your shirt and let them punch you in the stomach.”

There are sayings of Jesus which are Semitic exaggerations, a way of talking to emphasize a point. When it comes to Jesus teachings on non-retaliation, however, they are so frequent and so often applied to real situations in his life that biblical scholars rate non-violence/non-retaliation as central to the Jesus way of Life.

Today I want to share some thoughts about not doing violence to others and then some thoughts about not doing violence to ourselves.

Non-violence to others, that is, the refusal to be a soldier, seemed to me an obvious Christian value. In the early seventies, a college student at St John Fisher in Rochester, I read a lot of Tolstoy, and Gandhi and Martin Luther King; readings which re-affirmed what to me seemed obvious, especially for living the Jesus way. In those Vietnam War years someone who was drafted would likely be sent to a place where the job was killing “the enemy.” At nineteen then I decided I would apply for Conscientious Objector status. And after a year of discussion with my draft board my application was approved, and I became a C.O. A year after that I applied to the Peace Corps because I always felt service to country was a good thing, and I served in West Africa from 1975-77, but that is another story.

Turning the other cheek in real life is something awesome to behold. In 1974 when I was serving at the Catholic Worker, Saint Joseph House, near the Bowery, there would come sometimes to our soup kitchen drunk, violent persons wanting to come inside and wreck the place. Bill Griffith was on the door one such morning. He was trying to prevent an angry violent guy from entering inside, and suddenly the fellow punched Bill hard on the left side of his face. I was standing next to Bill and I thought this was going to turn into a slug fest, because Bill was a Vietnam Veteran. Instead, without hesitating, Bill turned the right side of his face to the assailant, and Pow, the assailant slugged Bill on that side of his face. Then Bill turned again his cheek, he even pointed at it …. The angry violent guy was surprised by Bill, but still it did not stop him, and he hit him again. This went on for about five minutes until I couldn’t take it and I grabbed the assailant and with the help of other Catholic Workers we wrestled the assailant down.

Bill Griffith is still there at that Catholic Worker house and he has been there now for almost fifty years. I am telling the story of his journey to non-violence because it is so different than mine. While for me it was through reading and reflection, for Bill his journey to non-violence was his battle experience in the Vietnam War, and the horror of those killing fields.

Now I want to say something about practicing non-violence toward ourselves.

When people ask me what’s the main difference between African culture and American culture I always think of TIME. Africans seem at peace with time. Here in the USA we are battling time, we are racing against the clock, we are at war with time. The problem is that being at war with time, you are at war with yourself, because our lives are the precious time we have on earth.

It seems here in the USA every morning when I wake up and face the day I start thinking how much can I accomplish today, how much can I fit in. But in Malawi I didn’t have that sense of time. There in Africa if someone saw you in a hurry they would say: “*Haraka, Haraka”* and you would say: “Hakuna Baraka. Haraka Haraka” means “Hurry, Hurry.” And when someone says that to you, it helps you realize that you’re in overdrive, and so you say: “Hakuna Baraka,” meaning “There’s no blessing.” I like this custom, it reminded me to be at peace with time, with life.

How about we try learning this bit of Swahili. I will say “Haraka Haraka” and you say “Hakuna Baraka” … “Haraka haraka?” – “Hakuna Baraka”….

So, avoid “haraka haraka” – hurry, hurry, Why? Because “hakuna Baraka” – there’s no blessing.

Lent begins in a couple weeks. The French word out of which Lent comes, is *Lentement*. *Lentement* means “Slowly.” In Swahili we say “Pole, Pole.” “Slowly, slowly.” A phrase one often hears is “Pole Pole Ndio Mwendo” or “Slow, Slow as you go.”

This Lent consider giving up the Rat Race. This Lent consider making peace with time. Start by looking at your relationship to time. Are you “doing time,” like a person in prison does time. Or, are you, in the Benedictine monastic approach, “celebrating the hours.” This Lent consciously celebrate the hours. Not necessarily with the breviary, the Book of Hours but simply practice hospitality, radical hospitality to the hours of your day. In Judaism the Sabbath is welcomed like a Queen, wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could welcome each and every hour of each and every day as our Queen.

Cathedrals in the Catholic world were built as temples to create holy space. Sabbath in the Jewish tradition are temples of time that create holy hours.

Sister Joan Chittester Says “Life is now. Only now. But who of us ever stops to notice it. The present is what takes us into the center of ourselves, and the present asks us, where have you been all this time?” Sister Joan names this practice, “Dailiness,” she says holiness is dailiness. I would go further and say holiness is hourliness. Maybe this lent give yourself a two minute Sabbath once every hour. Create in your day a few temples of time, Holy Pauses.

Another suggestion to consider and this might be a difficult Lenten practice for busy people, but just consider taking a look at the downside of multi-tasking. I guess, the upside is you get more stuff done. The downside is how it reduces your presence to whatever you are doing. I once heard a happy holy person advise: start a task, do it completely, finish it, pause; then do the next task; and when you hear the bell ring for prayer, put down even a task midway done, and go sit and be present to the One who in everything at every moment is present to you.

My favorite Beatitude is Blessed are the Meek. Another way of saying it is: How lucky you are to be a gentle, slow, serene person: you will inherit the earth. That is surprising, you might expect Jesus to say, the meek will inherit Heaven.

Okay, I know that in our culture to make peace with time, to slow down, will make you an oddball, or seem inferior as when people begin to say this about you: he is a bit slow, or she is a bit slow which in the USA is not a compliment, but kind of a put down. But how much there is to gain, those who slow down, will inherit the earth. And even now, the slow ones have a taste of their inheritance, indeed: Happy the slow ones, for they smell the roses.

The parish theme for this Lent is Be Not Afraid (the words used by the Risen Jesus on Easter Sunday).

The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. So, together as a parish this lent, to overcome fear, let’s grow in love.

Try to pause once during your day and do this Lenten practice.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. Love can endure all things.”

Then put the name of Jesus to replace Love. And, of course, it still works.

Jesus is patient, Jesus is Kind, not envious or boastful, etc.

But if you put your own name there, Bob is patient, but he isn’t; Bob is kind, but not all the time, etc. well, it doesn’t rhyme any more, but if you consciously work on it, “Love is” might ever so slowly start to match your name.

Try then this Lent to be gentler toward the world, and toward yourself. Try to make your name mean love.

And remember when you are breaking the beatific speed limit:

“Haraka Haraka?”

“Hakuna Baraka!”