

“Western Christianity Must be Reborn on the Sermon on the Mount”

The Anglican Church of St. John the Divine

Epiphany 7

February 20, 2022

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On October 17, 1934, a 28-year-old German Pastor wrote a letter to a revered Indian leader who had then just turned 65. The pastor had been wanting to visit India for some time. He now writes his letter with urgency; he can feel time slipping away. Here is one paragraph from that letter.

It is no use to foretell the future which is in God’s hands, but if not all signs deceive us, everything seems to work for war in the near future, and the next war will certainly bring the spiritual death of Europe. What we need therefore in our countries is a truly spiritual living christian peace movement. Western Christianity must be reborn on the Sermon on the Mount and here is the crucial point why I am writing to you. From all I know about you and your work after having studied your books and your movement for a few years, I feel we western Christians should try to learn from you, what realisation of faith means, what a life devoted to political and racial peace can attain. If there is anywhere a visible outline towards such attainments, than I see it in your movement. I know, of course, you are not a baptised Christian, but the people whose faith Jesus praised mostly did not belong to the official Church at that time either. We are having great theologians in Germany - the greatest of them being to my opinion Karl Barth, whose disciple and friend I am happy to be - they are teaching us the great theological thoughts of the Reformation anew, but there is no one to show us the way towards a new christian life in uncompromising accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. It is in this respect that I am looking up to you for help.

The writer was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the recipient, Mahatma Gandhi. The trip to India never materialized. 11 years after sending that letter, the Nazis executed Bonhoeffer. Three years later, a Hindu radical assassinated Gandhiji. Dietrich never met Mohandas, the man whom he so deeply venerated.

Bonhoeffer’s letter is visionary, prophetic and strange. Why should a noted Christian theologian write to a Hindu to learn about the Sermon on the Mount? Bonhoeffer is persuaded that no one in his time had a deeper living and practical appreciation for the Sermon on the Mount than the person whom Winston Churchill called that “half-naked fakir.”

But there is something else curious about that letter. Bonhoeffer worries about the very “spiritual death of Europe.” He was surely right. We are still living in the aftermath of that gory war and its horrors—not just its brutal battles but also the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Bonhoeffer was not wrong in the slightest! But how is a sermon, any sermon even our Lord’s going to save us? How can Western Christianity be “reborn on the Sermon on the Mount?” This we cannot fathom. Do words, any words, have that kind of power? Can words save? We stand before an apparently insurmountable cognitive hurdle because we have lost confidence in the power of words to transform lives.

But remember what Jesus was called in his own lifetime. Rabbi, Teacher! We know him today by many other titles—Messiah, Son of God, Savior even God Incarnate. These titles mean far more to us than the one title that Jesus himself accepted without hesitation. Strange, no? Why does the title “Teacher” carry so little weight with us?

Here’s one answer: Our focus has shifted away from how Jesus saves by teaching to how Jesus saves by dying. Jesus’s death has come to mean more to us than Jesus’s life. Unsurprisingly

then, what he actually said gets short shrift. The religion *about* Jesus has replaced and displaced the religion *of* Jesus.

Because Christians have become persuaded that we are saved only by Christ's atoning death, the notion that Jesus's *words* can save has become well-near impossible for us to understand. How can teaching heal, transform, and save?

But now, think with me. Have there not been people who in your lives who saved you from confusion, desperation, and lack of direction by the rightly spoken word? Have we forgotten that people still seek out gurus whose words are memorized, savored, interrogated and practiced?

In the Gospels, we find that Jesus's power is demonstrated by pairing healings with teachings. Recall our reading from last Sunday:

¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases...¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor/for yours is the kingdom of God."

By His touch, our Lord heals bodies; by His words, he heals our spirits. Both are important; both indispensable.

If only the Church had not severed his words from his deeds, his life from his death.

If only the church had not severed the religion *about* Jesus from the religion *of* Jesus!

If only the Church had not reduced the life-saving Beatitudes to dismissable platitudes.

Recall the words of Gandhi who said, "If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, "Oh yes, I am a Christian." Gandhi's encounter with the Sermon on the Mount raises for us a daunting question: what would you and I say? If we had to stand and face the Sermon on the Mount, could we truthfully call ourselves Christians? I could not say yes— not if I am judged by my deeds.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

No wonder we are so very keen to explain away the Sermon on the Mount! We know that measured by Jesus's words, few could say, "Yes, I truly am the Nazarene's disciple!"

Here then is the tragic irony. Our beloved Rabbi, our guru, has given us the words of life. We deeply desire to be saved, to be made whole, to find shalom, both in our hearts and with each other. Jesus has taught us how. Yet we dare not listen.

So, we come now around back to the question: wherein lies the great power of Sermon? Can these words heal? How? Time is short so I must be brief. There is no life without conflict. This is a basic truth of life. Conflict exists within families and among nations, in the bedroom as well as the boardroom. We do not agree. Confronted by conflict, we seem to have only two choices: acquiesce or fight, intimidate or be intimidated. If we acquiesce—especially out of fear—we are diminished not just in our enemy's eyes but in our own. We cannot hold our heads high. Fear colonizes and corrodes our spirits. Self-worth and dignity die.

So, rather than cower in cowardice, we join the fray. But the trouble is that we know only one way to fight. We seek to wound and injure. Whether by throwing punches or hurling words, we seek to diminish, wound, or even kill. We naively imagine that somehow, we can hurt others without hurting ourselves. We are trapped between unacceptable alternatives: diminish or be diminished, wound or be wounded, kill or be killed. Can we imagine a more soul and shalom destroying set of

alternatives? The pages of history are nothing but an endless oscillation between these two unacceptable alternatives with no third option.

So it stood until our Lord preached the Sermon on the Plain! The greatness of the Sermon rests in this. Jesus presents a third option: we can fight not with physical force but soul-force. We wield the power of love against the powers of hate and violence. Our Lord calls us to join the fight. Better to fight than to be afraid. But Jesus's disciples meet brute force with soul force; we meet hatred with love. Engage in the only form of combat that can truly defeat the enemy—by converting him into a friend. After all, your life and his are utterly inextricable. It is an illusion to imagine that you can wound the other without wounding yourself. For you and your enemy are inseparably one. This is the great soul and world healing lesson of the Sermon on the Mount.

Bonhoeffer never met Gandhi. Thankfully, another Christian pastor, discovered the power of the Gandhi's life and understanding of the Sermon two decades after Bonhoeffer wrote his letter. On September 28, 1958, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published these words,

As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The “turn the other cheek” philosophy and the “love your enemies” philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months.¹

Friends, Dietrich, Mohandas, and Martin are right. Western Christianity must be reborn on the Sermon on the Mount. Let us give the last word to Brother Martin. The choice for the church and the world today, as Martin put it, “is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is **either nonviolence or nonexistence.**” May God's Spirit bring us back to our Lord's sermon, to hear it afresh, and grant us the power to live in the way of loving nonviolence. Amen

¹ King Jr, Martin Luther. *The Radical King (King Legacy)* (p. 45). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.