""Do I Really Have to Love My Enemies: Non-violence in a violent world"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
7th Sunday after Epiphany
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St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Back on Jan. 18 if you headed left out of here on Rt. 2 and ended up in Skowhegan, you would have seen something rarely witnessed in high school sports in Maine – at the multi-team Skowhegan Open wrestling meet, a mother rushed onto the mat because her son and another wrestler began to fight after their match. That set off a multi-person fracas that included an assistant coach from Cony High subduing an adult spectator. But this incident wasn't unique. There have been fights at basketball games this year among spectators in Portland, Wales and Easton. Why is this happening? Here's how Karissa Niehoff of the National Federation of School Sports Officials puts it,

"Self-control has eroded. There's a greater sense of 'I'm upset and I'm entitled to get angry. The levels of emotional upset and how it manifests into behaviors is more extreme. They just erupt, and it's more aggressive than it used to be. It's not just poor behavior in the stands, with jeering and taunting. This is physical violence. We're seeing more of that."

Are we surprised? Nationally are we more ready to punch, if not shoot, first and ask questions later? We're sitting on a political powder keg right now and people seem either wildly happy or extremely upset and powerless. Is it a surprise that violence seems an easy recourse when people in prison for nearly beating policemen to death during the Jan. 6 insurrection get pardoned and hailed as patriots? And are churches not only condoning but instigating?

The movement of white Christian nationalist churches takes as one of their main scriptural verses to justify behavior to take over the nation as Matthew 11:12 "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force". And if you drive between Auburn and here on Rt. 4 often as I do, you go past the Victory Church which has had this Bible verse on its signboard for a month, "Be strong and courageous", Joshua 1:9, said as Joshua was about to lead the Israelites into battle as the Commander of the Lord's Army. Now I'm sure that most of us want to be strong and courageous at times but as churches that use the name Christian, why don't we quote more often the words of Christ himself? What if we put on our

signboard the words we heard today, “Love your enemies”, “Turn the other cheek”, “Be merciful” ?

Which gets us to the gospel. These words of Jesus have been unpopular through most of Christian history, though the Golden Rule “Do to others as you would have them do to you” has been popular as a poster, less so to actually do it. What was Jesus saying here and what was the purpose of St. Luke in putting all these sayings together?

As we mentioned last week, what we heard today is part of a section St. Luke calls “The Sermon on the Plain” and it is intended as a radical mini-catechism to train believers. Radical because what’s advocated here is so counter-cultural. A mini-catechism because it boils down Jesus’ teaching into sayings easy to remember. But an important point is that these sayings are intended for committed disciples. They make no sense by the values of the culture or the world. In your academic life did you ever get into a course that you realized was way over your abilities or current knowledge? These words won’t stick if we haven’t gone a ways on our journey.

Scholar John Dominic Crossan summarizes today’s gospel this way:
We have in these verses a radical mini-catechism built around an absolutely nonviolent interpretation of the Golden Rule derived from God the Father as model of that perfection. Its four main points are:

1. It starts with the Golden Rule: do to others as you would have them do to you
2. Our behavior needs to exceed that of the non-believers and we need to love, do good, bless and pray for our enemies
3. We turn the cheek, give our coats and give to anyone who asks something from us
4. We do all this to mirror God our Father who is all merciful so we are merciful too.

But has anyone taken this mini-catechism seriously? Are there any passing grades? Let’s name two great apostles of nonviolence. Mohandas Gandhi known as the Mahatma and Martin Luther King Jr.

Gandhi’s miraculous success in freeing India from colonial rule shows the power of non-violence. Here are a few quotes from him:

I object to violence because, when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary, the evil it does is permanent.”

"Non-violence is the summit of bravery. And in my own experience, I have had no difficulty in demonstrating to men trained in the school of violence the superiority of non-violence."

Gandhi, a Hindu, also said, "The only people who don't see the teachings of Christ as nonviolent are Christians".

And the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

"We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts."

"Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love. Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another."

This non-violence is anything but passivity. It is the strength to sit at an all-white lunch counter in Montgomery, Alabama, the strength to face growling German shepherds and fire hoses in Selma Alabama.

I was also formed while in seminary by the Catholic Peace Movement, something that hasn't gone away. Pax Christi International is a global Catholic peace movement working worldwide to establish peace, respect for human rights, and justice and reconciliation. This movement springs from the life and work of people like Dorothy Day and Daniel and Philip Berrigan.

We have a rich tradition that we don't talk about enough in our churches of nonviolent resistance to evil. Sold yet? Maybe not. It takes time: time to pray, time to fast, time to read and reflect, time to dialogue. What I do know is that the words of today's gospel call us to nonviolent response in the face of evil or persecution and I invite you to take time to meditate on those words and how they might apply in your own life.

Somehow we may all be called on to respond to a rising tide of rage and rudeness, if not at high school sporting events, then on the highways, in a hospital waiting room, in having to wait for a seat at a restaurant.

Jennifer Finney Boylan, a trans woman and Colby College professor recounts going out to dinner one night with her mom, and receiving cruel treatment from their transphobic

waiter. Boylan walks out feeling hurt and sad, but she notices with surprise that her mom is unfazed. When she asks why, her mom says, “Oh Jenny, you know he didn’t really mean it.”

Boylan almost retorts, “Of course he meant it!” But then she realizes what her mom is saying: “She wasn’t really talking about the man before her; she was talking about a better version of him, a self he had not been able to become, but in whom she had not lost faith. He was not yet that man. But, she felt, in receiving the gift of kindness, and of grace, maybe he still had a shot."

The work of forgiveness is some of the hardest work we can do in this world. It is also some of the most important work we can do in this world. So. May we stop drinking the poison of incivility and bitterness. May we glimpse the “better selves” that reside within the people who do us harm. May we rise. And may we taste the full measure of the freedom that awaits us when we choose to forgive, to be merciful, to turn the other cheek, to do to others as we would have them do to us.