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Arlington Street Church

Season for Nonviolence

We find ourselves this morning in the Season for Nonviolence, an observance inspired by the memorial anniversaries of Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sixty-four days of education, reflection, and action are to unfold between January 30th, the anniversary of the Mahatma's assassination, and April 4th, when Dr. King was murdered.

Satyagraha is the Sanskrit word that Gandhi gave to the philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance in his campaigns for independence in South Africa and India. Literally, *satya* means truth, and *agraha* means insistence, but *satyagraha* has been most famously translated as *soul force*.¹

“*Satyagraha*,” he writes “is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatsoever; and it ever insists upon truth.”² Gandhi-ji was deeply influenced by Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, among others.³ He also drew on the uniquely Indian philosophy of *ahimsa*, a Sanskrit word meaning to avoid violence and do no harm, which is deeply connected to the idea “that all kinds of violence entail negative karmic consequences.”⁴ *Ahimsa* can be found in writings dated in the eighth century before the common era; Gandhi took ancient ideas and made of them something entirely new, and revolutionary.

1 Gandhi-ji said, “Truth (*satya*) implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement *Satyagraha*, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence” (see Gandhi, M.K., “The Advent of Satyagraha” [in chapter 12 of *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 1926]). “Its root meaning is holding onto truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force” (see Gandhi, M.K., “Statement to Disorders Inquiry Committee,” January 5, 1920 [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 19, p. 206]).

2 Gandhi, M.K., “Letter to Mr. —,” 25 January, 1920 (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 19, p. 350)

3 Gandhi, M.K., *Non-violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, (1961, p. iii)

4 wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahimsa

In action, *satyagraha* is tremendously complex, demanding microscopically impeccable thought, feeling, and spirit. When I was in divinity school, after I had devoted a semester's coursework to the study of the Mahatma's life and work, I had the unique and distinctly unnerving experience of understanding less about it than when I had begun. I did emerge from that head-spinning inquiry, however, clear about one thing: Gandhi was a peaceful warrior, a spiritual hero, and, to paraphrase that immortal line from *When Harry Met Sally*, I wanted what he was having.

In this Season for Nonviolence, we can support efforts to end violence. Here at Arlington Street, one of our Jubilee projects is a partnership with Villages Without Walls, based at the Bethel Tabernacle Pentecostal Church in Dorchester. Villages Without Walls is a program designed, in the words of our friend, founder Talia Rivera, to reach out “to youth who are high-risk ... offenders, ... gang affiliated, ... involved in street crime, drug use .. court involved ... or ... who are considered to be at great risk of ...[being] so.” There are abundant opportunities to give service to that good work; if you are interested in learning more, please speak with me, or I can direct you to the Arlington Street leaders who are our Jubilee liaisons to Villages.

Here is a beautiful but soul-searing story about an effort to end violence by human rights activist and author Kathy Kelly. In January of 2002, she visited the Baghdad School of Folk Music and Ballet in the capital of Iraq. She writes, “The children there were buoyant. Their school, one of the finest in the Middle East, taught Arab and Western classical music, dance, and art. I wandered in and out of classrooms, marveling at how obviously this school 'worked.' In the art department, I happened upon a display of children's drawings, one of which, done with pastel magic markers and chalk, showed a jumbo jet plunging into the left-hand tower of the World Trade Center.

“Do you think I could meet the person who drew that picture?” I asked the children. And then they were like their own little secret service; in three minutes, they had the artist there, all of eleven years old, and he was so proud.

“I asked him, 'Can you tell me what was on your mind when you drew that?' He squared his shoulders and ... said, 'Allah wanted this to happen to people in America, so people in America understand what happen to other people when America hit them.' By then, his teacher had sidled up, and he saw her face, and then he said, 'and we love the people in America, and we want to be their friends.'

“So I told him about being in New York City on September 11th. I told him about

families that carried banners that said, 'Our grief is not a cry for war,' even though they ... had lost loved ones. I told these kids about a beautiful song that had been sung at one hundred fifty of the memorial services for the people [who were] killed.... I told them it was a peace anthem that celebrated the common aspirations of people ... and they said, 'Yes, madam, and why you not teach us this song?'

“Well, I was in trouble,” Kathy Kelly continues, “because my Arabic isn't that good, and my voice isn't much better. But the director of the school, Hisham al Sharaf, had come, and he doesn't understand the concept of not being able to do something. Within a day, he and a foreign ministry worker and our driver had gotten together and transliterated this song into Arabic, and the kids were singing it to me, with the bargain that I would bring it to audiences in the United States as often as I could....

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
 a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
 This is my home, the country where my heart is;
 Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.
 But other hearts in other lands are beating
 With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine....

O hear my song, O God of all the nations,
 A song of peace for their land and for mine.⁵

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“... The fact is that the tape of the school children singing that song is the only item that survived the looting and ransacking of the Baghdad School of Folk Music and Ballet after the United States Shock and Awe invasion of Iraq. Hisham al Sharaf came to see me, after the invasion had begun, after he'd tried in many ways to defend his school – talking, pleading with armed looters to leave it alone, or at least ... to take [only] valuables, not destroy the instruments and papers – and he had the tape in the palm of his hand. And I listened to it on a tape recorder with earphones, and I started just to sing along. Then I stopped, because he was shedding tears.”⁶

I think about how those children would tell this story, if they lived to tell the story. I wonder, in the face of unspeakable, senseless violence, how any of them could feel

⁵ *This is My Song, set to Finlandia* (lyrics by Lloyd Stone, music by Jean Sibelius)

⁶ Kathy Kelly and Milan Rai, *Other Lands Have Dreams,: From Baghdad to Pekin Prison*, pp. 9-10

anything but grief and rage and the consuming fire of revenge. *And* I know that it's possible to transcend those terrible bonds, because people like Jesus and Gandhi-ji and Dr. King and Aung San Suu Kyi⁷ and Rigoberta Menchú Tum⁸ and Kathy Kelly did it, and do it, as a daily practice.

Thirteenth century Sufi mystic poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī writes,

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing,
there is a field.
I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase
each other
doesn't make any sense.⁹

We are called to go out into that field, out into the world, to bring love, service, justice, and peace. But we are also called, as our chalice lighting by Lao-Tse reminded us this morning,¹⁰ to make peace in our own hearts. In her book *Of War and Love*, German theologian Dorothee Sölle writes, “If we want to take part in liberation movements, then the militarism that dominates us is our main enemy.”¹¹

My friend Holly Near's friend Jim is a huge bear of a guy, a Vietnam vet who has spent the years since he's come home trying to stop fighting that war. The violence he witnessed in Vietnam, the violence in which he participated, poisoned him, sickened him, and threatened to take his life. The way Jim negotiated a truce in his soul was with the power of *satyagraha*, soul force: an unconditional determination to live the rest of his life as a peaceful warrior.

It's the way that he has embodied that vow in his daily life that never ceases to amaze me. My favorite story about Jim is about what he does in supermarkets when a child is crying or screaming and a parent begins to lose it. Just this: as the situation escalates, Jim purposefully steers his cart into a display of caned goods. He doesn't

7 Burma; Nobel Peace Prize, 1991

8 Guatemala; Nobel Peace Prize, 1992

9 Rumi (1207-1273), *Out Beyond Ideas*, trans. Coleman Barks

10 “If There Is To Be Peace” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, reading #602

11 p. xiii

consider it a success unless it comes down with a huge crash. The point is, no tantrum can compete with Jim's giant distraction. Invariably, there is a collective intake of breath, and a great silence descends in aisle six. The energy shifts. "Sorry," Jim says, stooping to begin the cleanup.

He's sorry to have made a mess, but he's not sorry to have intervened in circumstances that he reads as potentially violent – not just physically violent, but emotionally and spiritually violent. His creativity is boundless. I'll let you know when I hear another chapter of Jim's excellent adventures in soul force.

My spiritual companions, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, Talia Rivera, the Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Kathy Kelly, Hisham al Sharaf, Jim, and we – each of us – it is we who are called to give ourselves to the work of peace in the nations, in the cities, between neighbors, in the home, in the heart. Out beyond right and wrong, there is a field where the phrase "each other" makes no sense. In this Season for Nonviolence, let's meet there, where the soul lies down in the grass and remembers that we are inextricably interconnected. Let's live there, growing our souls in soul force. *Peace.*

