

## Playing God? Matthew 5: 21-26

Ours is a journey of questions, a journey of opening ourselves to the mysteries around and within us. It is a journey of waking up to the truth we discover and of living in and out of that truth. In this spirit, I have invited your questions in the "Ask Jack" teaching series. They have become our content and all of us have benefited and grown in the process. The question for this teaching is: "The sixth commandment says, 'Thou shalt not kill!' Some versions say, 'Don't commit murder!' Is this a contradiction in the scriptures? So, when soldiers kill it's all right because it's not murder? What about the interpretation of using the word 'kill' instead of 'murder'? Does that then make it right?" The question, succinctly, is this: "Is it ever okay to kill another person?"

Murder is obviously as wrong as anything can be. Both versions of the ten commandments state it, "You shall not murder" (Ex 20:13 and Deut 5:17) Matthew's gospel, in that portion called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You have heard it was said in ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." There's not much wiggle room with Jesus. We find ourselves on the knife's edge looking for justification with Jesus allowing us to protect ourselves, to kill in self-defense or for national security for the preservation of our own property or to protect our own sense of safety and security. At what point does it start to be all right? At what point do we stop killing? At what point do we give up even just the option of violence?

What's behind this issue? What is the question behind the question and what was Jesus talking about with his radical call to non-violence? That deeper question is the subject of this teaching. Jesus was touching a reality that is far deeper and more pervasive than we realize today. There is spirituality at the core of the universe: all life, all matter. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Eph.6:12-13) Our questions about killing compel us to examine the reality of those "cosmic powers of this present darkness" and the "spiritual forces of evil."

Let's begin our examination in a familiar place. Most Saturday mornings, I find myself getting into the day by turning on the television and watching a western. If you watch enough westerns, you find a very similar story line. They are pretty much identical. There is always a bad guy who is pretty vile. He has his way for most of the show and pushes the good guy right to the edge, even threatening his life. Finally, there is a confrontation, usually a gun fight. The bad guy draws first, but the good guy is faster on the draw and kills the bad guy. It's a fair fight so there's no guilt. Evil is vanquished and life goes on, somehow better off for being rid of the villain.

From time to time, I switch the channel and find a good superhero cartoon. If I'm lucky, it features Superman or Batman. Coincidentally, the storyline is not that different than the western.

Theologian Walter Wink called the philosophy behind these story lines the *myth of redemptive violence*. It's everywhere in our culture. Wink suggests that we subscribe to this myth with religious fervor. I confess that I love westerns and cartoons. I also love comic books, but I believe Wink is right. This is not just kid stuff. It's not child's play.

Wink's version of the generic superhero comic or cartoon show plot is:

An indestructible good guy is unalterably opposed to an irreformable and equally indestructible bad guy. Nothing can kill the good guy, though for the first three-fourths of the [episode] he suffers grievously, appearing hopelessly trapped, until somehow the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order until the next installment"

(Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 17)

The plot is designed to defeat the villain without ever changing the underlying system.

"Superman [like Batman] intervenes in the lives of people [while] never challenging them to evaluate their beliefs and values or exposing themselves the anguish of transformation." (Wink, 19)

Then I change the channel back to the western. The good gunslinger kills the bad guy then rides out of town without challenging people to change how they live. The message is clear. You can't trust the legal system. It is weak or corrupt and incapable of dealing with massive evil. For that you need a vigilante to kill the evildoer, restore order, and bring justice and peace.

I don't want to dwell too long on cartoons and westerns. It's just that their example signals us that something deeper is at work all around us. The *myth of redemptive violence* assumes that the only way to find safety, security, and peace in any ultimate sense is through violent force. It just seems reasonable. Of course, only the threat of superior force can ultimately keep peace. Isn't it the threat of a nuclear option that keeps the world safe? This idea goes back a long time. The ancient Babylonians believed that violence is so intrinsic to creation that it cannot be avoided. The only way to control the evil in the hearts of people is through the force of powerful domination systems – governments of control. In contrast, the Bible's idea is that creation is good, spoken into being by a benevolent God. Evil is present, but capable of being transformed. The religion of ancient Babylon seems to be the true cultural religion of modern America. It under girds our foreign policy.

When we send others out to take life for the greater good of stopping a deadly enemy or sometimes the less great good of preserving our national power and influence -- or dominance, the sacrifice asked is more than we know. We ask them to risk their lives, to risk being killed, but also to risk being in position to take another human being's life. We cannot do that at all lightly, only for that greatest good. Even so, the cost is great, the psychological and spiritual cost to a soldier or police officer when they take another life even in self-defense. It is a horrible cost when a prison guard carries out the order for capital punishment. It is a terrible cost when a young woman chooses abortion, even when her reasons are so compelling as to be justifiable.

Life is the greatest gift we receive. No action is more terrible for a human being than to take another person's life. Even for those who seem to be hardened against it, we can only imagine the terrible cost. Author JK Rowling, in her *Harry Potter* series, illustrates this truth through the actions of an evil wizard who literally tears his soul apart through murder in an effort to hide the pieces and achieve some degree of immortality. It eventually destroys him. Acts of killing, even when justified, tear us apart spiritually and only the deep power of love can bring healing, and then only slowly.

Yet we trust the power of redemptive violence. Our national security depends on military deterrence. We trust that our personal security depends on a strong police force, a home alarm system, and for some, training in martial arts or a permit to carry a firearm. I find myself still trusting in the power of the threat of violent deterrence, even though I don't want to. I trust that

power more than I trust what Jesus taught and the approach to security he espoused. Jesus' way is just not practical. It does not seem to work.

The US military exists to protect the lives and property of US citizens. Christianity is drafted to support and justify using that violent force when it is deemed necessary. But in the gospels there is honestly no room to justify violent force within the context of Christian faith. Jesus taught peacemaking, compassion, and love as the path to the reign of God.

Jesus told us to stop worship instantly when you realize someone has a grievance against you. (Matt. 5: 21-26) Stop and reconcile the broken relationship, then offer your worship. Jesus lived and taught in the context of the Roman Empire's oppressive occupation. He preached no violence and no deadly force. Of course, it was not practical against the power of Rome. More important, violence perpetuates itself. It breeds more violence and cannot lead to lasting peace -- *Shalom*.

When soldiers are sent to war to kill on behalf of the nation, it is a sign that we have failed to find another way. Jesus calls us to find that other way. Peacemaking requires the same commitment and courage it takes for a soldier to go to war. Peacemaking requires the values of a soldier: discipline, commitment to service, courage, and self-sacrifice. Peacemaking requires the values of a saint: commitment to service, courage, and self-sacrifice.

We who are Christians and also citizens need to lead our nation to find the tools, tactics, and vision to move the world away from violence in all its forms toward peace. Such leadership will hasten the realization of God's reign among us. Such leadership can hasten the day when we no longer need to ask "under what circumstances is it okay to kill another person?" On that day, we will begin to live free of the fear that seeks security in deadly strength. It will take courage, commitment, and self-sacrifice. And it will take faith because this world we share is still rooted so deeply in the ultimate power of violence and force.

The military is not the problem. It only reflects the problem. As a society, we rely so heavily on our ability to threaten violence that we have lost the will and creativity to seek compelling, non-violent avenues to peacemaking. We don't even know what the possibilities can be. We are good, though broken, people in the midst of a good, though broken, society. What can we do?

First, we will have to commit to reconcile our broken relationships. Will you commit to do this in your life as an act your worship? The commitment needs to happen today and you need to begin repairing those relationships this week.

Second, armed with the knowledge that violence does not lead to peace, only to more violence, let us challenge the Christian Church to acknowledge both our addiction to violence and also the radical nature of Jesus' call to non-violent reconciliation and peacemaking.

Third, we need to confess that we live in a world that is both good and also broken, divine and fallen. The work of transforming society cannot be accomplished by us or in our lifetime. Likely, we won't find that transformation reaching completion in our own lives. But it does not really matter. We must choose to live by faith that the reality of the universe is what Jesus envisioned as the reign of God. In that reality, we can sing, rejoice, and live with integrity, trusting that God is faithful, capable, and so very good. Making peace is the way of living in God it is absolutely central to our journey of following Jesus. Let us live in this reality. Let us strive to make peace and bring justice and equity for all people. And let this be our legacy, to be a blessing to others in Jesus' name.