

Non-Violence In Everyday Life

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**Nonviolence in Every Day Life
Romans 12: 16-21**

This morning in our reading from the book of Romans we heard some powerful teachings from the Apostle Paul about the qualities that we should strive to embody in our lives as Christians. Among the virtues that mark the life of a true Christian, Paul included these words: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

"Living peaceably with all" is the only phrase that is qualified by the dependent clause, "If possible." Here in the United Church of Christ, we always talk about peace *and* justice together. We believe that the two are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other. Paul's qualification seems to be reminding the Christians in Rome not to pursue peace at the expense of what is good or right.

But it is really the second dependent clause that Paul connects to "living peaceably with all" that I want to invite us to focus on this morning, the clause that says, "so much as it depends on you."

There are a lot of things that don't depend on us, things that we don't have the ability to control. We can't make people act in ways that honor and respect other people. We can't force them to abstain from violent and aggressive behavior. We can use positive or negative reinforcement to reward or

punish them for the choices they make, but ultimately we don't have nearly as much control as we like to imagine.

"If possible," said the Apostle Paul, "as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." What is the part that depends on us?

In the last chapter of his book, "A Hidden Wholeness," Parker Palmer writes about non-violence in everyday life. As a Quaker, we expect him to commend the life of passive resistance. The Quaker tradition has a long and honorable history of pacifism. They take seriously the admonition that violence only begets violence. When I first started reading the last chapter of Parker Palmer's book, I expected him to make his case against armed resistance and instead teach the practices of non-violent resistance that people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., relied on to effect change during the Civil Rights movement.

But Parker doesn't focus on physical violence at all in the closing chapter of his book. He doesn't comment on the violence of war, or hate crimes, or racial hostility. Instead, Parker Palmer challenges us to focus on the violence of our language. Palmer argues that all of the physical manifestations of violence have their origin in the violent words we use to talk to ourselves and to others.

On Thursday mornings, I play racquetball over at the 'Y' with Father Brian Coleman, the Episcopal priest at St. Thomas. I usually win our matches, but every

once in a while he'll score a run of points on me. All of a sudden I'll have trouble digging his serve out of the back corner of the court, or I'll get out of position and be unable to return a shot that I should have been able to get. If the run goes on for more than two or three points, I can feel my frustration level rising. And as it does, I notice that I begin to talk differently to myself. I don't swear a lot, but when I start playing poorly I find that I often belittle myself with violent language. Instead of focusing on what I need to do differently in order to return the next shot, I start upbraiding myself with demeaning words like, "You jerk...how could you miss that...you really stink at this game!"

I'm a pretty competitive person and I don't like losing. I don't like giving up points. And I don't like playing below my potential. I'm not a great racquetball player, but when I miss a shot that I know I am capable of making, I can really be harsh with myself. And when I start using violent language, language that is demeaning and degrading, then I begin behaving more violently. I slam my racquet against the wall, kick the door, or I smack the ball as hard as I can. Father Brian gets pretty amused by my antics and then he gets a smug little smirk on his face that gets me even more riled up inside!

Sometimes our most violent language is reserved for the things we say about ourselves. We can be pretty brutal in our self-talk. We belittle ourselves with demeaning words: "you stupid jerk, you ugly pig, you loser, you coward, you fraud."

Violence for Parker Palmer includes any way we have of violating the identity or integrity of another person. Sometimes the hardest person to live peaceably with is ourselves.

Violent self-talk leads to violent behavior. When we use demeaning and degrading language to talk about ourselves, then we stop treating ourselves with honor and respect and compassion. We do violence to ourselves. In extreme cases, we kill ourselves. In more common cases, we abuse our selves. We work too much and deprive ourselves of the joy of rewarding relationships. We deny ourselves the gift of Sabbath rest that renews our souls. We abuse our bodies with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. We stuff our bellies full of poisonous junk food or deprive ourselves of food that is full of goodness.

We treat ourselves the way we talk to ourselves because our language betrays our beliefs about how we deserve to be treated. Violent self-talk leads to violent behavior.

And we treat other people the way we talk about them as well.

This week we saw the consequences of violent self talk when an imbedded reporter for the Rolling Stone published his observations on General McChrystal's command of NATO forces in Afghanistan. What began as the arrogant self-talk of a general - who believed that his insight and his intellect and his understanding of the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan was superior to everyone else's -

became an act of disdain for the authority of civilian command in our military.

General McChrystal's arrogance could not be contained. It spilled out in conversations with his subordinates. Within a year of being entrusted with the command over NATO forces in Afghanistan, General McChrystal's demeaning language had created an atmosphere of contempt for civilian authority throughout his cabinet. This past week when the observations of the imbedded reporter were made public, President Obama summoned General McChrystal to Washington and immediately relieved him of his command.

Violent talk leads to violent behavior, behavior that violates the identity and integrity of others.

In the collection of teachings that we know as the "Sermon on the Mount", Matthew includes these words from Jesus: "You have heard that it was said to those of 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; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5: 21-22)." Jesus seemed to know that violent language leads to violent behavior.

Parker Palmer tells us that non-violence in every day life "requires a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul." That is particularly true of our language, both the things we say out loud and

the things we hold inside.

The derogatory comments that you make to your friends about some other person are neither innocent nor harmless. They are violent. Violent words lead to violent behaviors. You may never physically assault the person you demean in your casual conversations with others, but you will end up doing violence to them through slights, putdowns and subtle forms of disrespect that diminish the other person and leave them feeling excluded and unwanted.

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Everything that depends on you, begins with language that honors the soul. Amen.

