

March 18, 2012
"24 Hours that Changed the World" Series
4th Lent; Mark 15:1-15
preached by Kelly D. Turney
at ELUMC

How do you transcend violence while living in it? How do you live in peace with those with whom you disagree? Maybe even those who have actively sought your downfall? Without completely shutting yourself off from the outside world, or moving, how do you remain connected with enemies, seeking a transformed relationship? The Mennonites have been at this for longer than most—they have taken the Biblical mandate to be peace-makers to heart and where-ever there is conflict in the world, you can find Mennonites there working creatively toward conflict resolution. (My stole came from the Mennonites in Jerusalem who used their needlework to fund their peace ministries.) Today, we follow the work of John Paul Lederach,¹ a Mennonite who has spent three decades mediating peace and change in 25 countries— in some of the worst and most entrenched conflict zones. His stories of peasants and ordinary people who have been willing throughout the ages to sacrifice themselves for the way of peace echoes the story of Jesus standing in front of his enemies. But this is no fuzzy, feel-good, fairytale vision of peace. It is the long, slow, hard work of transformation. So as we reflect on communities working on peace, I invite you to remember that Jesus was himself a peasant, the leader of a small Jewish group, seeking a transformed relationship with those who were often at the very bottom of society. So you can lay the story of the last day of Jesus on top of these stories, you might also, overhear what it says about our the current political context and the destructive, partisan pattern in our nation.

Let us pray: *Open us this day, Holy One, to the mystery of ministry you have chosen us for, that you would make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for your unlimited and unconditional love.* [adapted from Henry Nouwen]

In Nepal, there's a 9-bean soup, called Kwati. In it, each bean has a different fermentation process and even when combined, every bean retains its flavor, but when they're brought together the nine beans create a flavor that's good for the whole. It's this soup, that the various groups in conflict in a community in Nepal, selected as its name, its metaphor, for their efforts to address the struggle over land and natural resources that had plagued them for generations. Each group had to wrestle with what their role would be in the discussion—were they a representative of their respective group or did they have to leave that identity behind to engage in the process of negotiation. Not satisfied with either of those choices, they envisioned this other way, the way of the Kwati: A way to frame their work together, recognizing they still advocated from their particular identity and they were still linked to their own group, but when they're brought together, there

had to be some that also thought about the good of the whole of the community.”² [photo: Chup Thapa] This photograph represents seven years of patient peace building—with intentional discussion and establishing relationship. The two facilitators are standing. The young woman, 25, is part of a Forest Conservation Group, she should’ve been sold into prostitution when she was younger, no doubt many of her family and friends were when groups of encroachers took over the land. The young man, also in his 20s, is a recently freed slave—from a group of bonded laborers, those who are landless “untouchables,” who were among the groups, along with other government forces, who encroached on the others. It’s remarkable that they’re together, and they negotiated a way to use the wood and forest that gave laborers a way to work, that preserved their livelihood, and the ability for everyone to live in the same vicinity. Kwati, a tasty soup and a metaphor for conflict resolution.

So how are entrenched enemies able to work together, in a way that is not just a watered-down, weak compromise that assures that no one gets ahead of the other, but rather engages all sides in a process that transforms the groups and the situation? It may seem impossible, Lederach says, since the current political model is an all-or-nothing kind of a format in which every decision “is gauged on if we haven’t won, we’ve at least assured that the other folks cannot carry victory away.” Lederach, who works at the grass roots level and at very high policy levels, says the “sophistication of how they’re doing it at the local level is leap years ahead of how politics is typically done.”

What is most distressful in terms of the American scene, he says, is that we’re congregating with like-minded folks with very little space for disagreement between us. We seem to have little capacity to be in significant and quality relationship with those who think very differently. The difficult work of peace-building is to create a quality of relationships among those who don’t think alike. Jesus modeled this way, where change starts small and it’s never a numbers game. The importance, in terms of impact and sustain-ability of change, is instead, in bringing together an improbable set of people and creating a space for more creative responses.

When conflict arises, there are two common patterns: one being confrontation that leads to violence, and the other being avoidance where there’s a win-lose, and one group has to move on to another place. This may be the pattern sought at the denominational level where one side hopes they can make policies so draconian that anyone who disagrees will leave. But confrontation and avoidance aren’t the

only ways to respond to conflict, only the most common. Re-framing the process opens possibilities for transformation. And it not only offers a new way of being into the future, it makes the old ways of dealing less possible, less likely to fall back on.³

In a rural area of Columbia, that for many years was overrun by different armed groups (from the left and the right), each demanding allegiance; one group of peasants, refused to fight with those claiming to fight for them. They decided to re-frame the conflict and not choose a side. They decided they would not bury their head in the sand, nor would they be driven out. They came up with a set of principles that are still guiding this community 25 years later. 1st principle was: We choose to die before we will kill. 2nd: We have no enemies. 3rd: We will seek to understand those who do not understand us. And they systematically set out to have a range of conversations with every armed group in the area. They have not escaped bloodshed, 4 years after they started, a few of their leaders were assassinated, but the movement has continued because they shifted their approach to enmity, they changed themselves and the region.

In front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the religious authorities, Jesus offered an alternative approach to enmity– he did not meet hatred with hate, he did not respond to violence with confrontation There's evidence that, before this last day, at least two of the religious authorities who may've been in the room, tried earlier to understand Jesus. There was the prominent Jewish leader, Nicodemus, you'll remember, who visited Jesus at night so as to avoid being seen, but scripture says he recognized Jesus as a wise rabbi who understood God. ["Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it." John 3: The Message] And Joseph of Arimathea, who, it seems, disagreed when it came to the death sentence, but, AT THE TRIAL, we're not given any evidence that anyone spoke up. [Hamilton says] "It's a fact of human existence: Resisting those in leadership, or in the majority, even when we believe they are doing wrong, is exceedingly difficult."⁴

The story loses much in translation but in essence, we're to understand that after the religious authorities handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities, Pilate offered that early morning crowd a choice between two would-be messiahs: Jesus of Nazareth, or the insurrection leader, Jesus Barabbas – Jesus means "savior" and Barabbas means "son of the Father," so the gospel writer frames the choice between the one who leads by acceptable human methods: who will lead by force,

throw out the Romans, reclaim tax money, wealth and prosperity and restore the strength to the Jewish kingdom. Or the one whose leadership style involves loving these same oppressors, serving them even as they dwell among them? Hamilton says if we ask ourselves, who would we choose? It's "not so difficult to understand the crowd's choice: Barabbas over Jesus. They choose the path of physical strength, military might and lower taxes over the path of peace through sacrificial love."⁵ I wonder what would've happened if they had not accepted the dichotomy of choices : release Jesus or Barabbas, but instead forged a creative path forward. I wonder what would've happened had Pilate went with his own gut (or heeded his wife's advice not to get mixed up in judging Jesus), and had instead, handed him back over to the Sanhedrin to do their own dirty work. But the scripture says, he too felt the pressure of the mob, and "wishing to satisfy the crowd, turned Jesus over for torture and crucifixion." (Mark 15:15)

For the religious authorities, I wonder what role being a persecuted population had on limiting the people's capacity to imagine a more creative response. When you're an oppressed minority, or even if you perceive yourself to be, it seems much more likely that you respond from a place of fear and anxiety, needing to keep what little power and control you have. Jerusalem was ruled by a foreign power. Jewish political and religious life was restricted by an enemy empire. History shows that those under the thumb of another, many, in turn, crush those who push against the small sphere of influence they command.

Given the repeated warnings Jesus gave his disciples about his time of death being near, it seems Jesus at least, understood the human tendency to eliminate whatever goes against the prevailing mindset, or whomever, is labeled an enemy to those with power. Many have debated what to make of Jesus' astounding unwillingness to defend himself. Maybe he saw the writing on the wall, and knew that whatever he said, it would end badly for him. Perhaps his silence indicates he was resigned to die, determined not to defend himself, not to try to get out of the death penalty because he believed only sacrificial love had the power to change the world.

Jesus' insistence on re-framing weakness and vulnerability as victory is understood by the early church as the "seeming absurdity of God" [1 Corinthians 1:25], and an example of how God turns conventional wisdom on its head. Is it any wonder that Paul writes to those early followers in Corinth, that the way of Jesus

looks like utter foolishness in terms of our human understandings of strength and victory by defeating one's enemies.

The good news, or maybe the hard news is, that we have the opportunity to adopt the foolishness of Christ. We can seek to be a community that imagines itself in relationship with those who would call themselves enemies. We have a chance to buck the conventional wisdom and refuse to call anyone an enemy. We can risk the absurd way of peace. Lederach has found that enduring progress takes root not with large numbers of people, but with quality of relationships between unlikely people. Can that be a description of us here, a small group of unlikely people? Who can create a space on this corner of East Longmeadow that holds varying opinions, that seeks to be deeply relational, even with those with whom we disagree. And can we invite others into this way of being, over and over, again, no matter how foolish we appear—no matter how messy, no matter how hard the way of peace— We can be a place of imagining the way of Christ. I'm counting on us to be a space of truly open hearts, open minds, and open doors. And I'm excited to be among such a people. Are you?

-
1. From *On Being* with Krista Tippett, NPR radio broadcast, "The Art of Peace" (Jan 12, 2012), www.onbeing.org
 2. From John Paul Lederach, *On Being* with Krista Tippett, NPR radio broadcast, "The Art of Peace" (Jan 12, 2012), www.onbeing.org
 3. From Krista Tippett in her interview with John Paul Lederach, *On Being* with Krista Tippett, NPR radio broadcast, "The Art of Peace" (Jan 12, 2012), www.onbeing.org
 4. From Adam Hamilton's *24 Hours that Changed the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) 51.
 5. From Adam Hamilton's *24 Hours that Changed the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) 73.