

I have a picture in my mind of Jason's first day of kindergarten.

Jason is walking with his brother Justin, a second grader at the time. They have on their backpacks, and they're walking ahead of me towards the bus-stop a few houses down from where we live. They're walking side by side, with their arms over each other's shoulders.

When I think of brotherly love, this is the first image that comes to my mind.

Now, I don't want to give the impression that they are always like this. They aren't. They are real boys.

However, I've seen them walk this way many, many times. It's what they do.

They both are blessed with the gift of knowing what it means to have a brother who loves him very much.

One of my favorite poems by Shel Silverstein, is called Hug-O-War.

You may know it.

It goes like this:

I will not play at tug o' war  
I'd rather play at hug o' war,  
Where everyone hugs  
Instead of tugs  
Where everyone giggles  
And rolls on the rug,  
Where everyone kisses  
And everyone grins  
And everyone cuddles  
And everyone wins.

We have hug-o-wars in our home. But I admit that tug-o-wars also happen, fairly. What might start off as playfulness can sometimes end in a too-rough "hug" that turns into a "tug," or more often turns into words that hurt, feelings that are bruised, an escalation. Even knowing what we know, trying to live a life of love and non-violence is not easy. What is it about our human nature that causes us to put aside what we know in the depths of our being to be God's truth for how God wants us to live our lives? Why do we find ourselves instinctively lashing out, instead of listening and loving each other?

In our Gospel lesson today, we hear about some Jewish scholars who are essentially badgering Jesus about whether or not he is the Messiah. Jesus rebukes them saying "I've already told you, but you don't believe because you are not a part of my flock. My sheep recognize my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

I want to talk about this a little bit because I believe we are witnessing some very real and frightening xenophobia in our public discourse. If we are watching the news and reading newspapers, it is clear that there are many instances of fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners happening every day: in terrorist bombings, race riots, quotes from political candidates, sentiments overheard in the line at the grocery store...

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus was speaking to scholars of his faith – to people who were like him, and he was saying: if you really knew me, you wouldn't need to even ask; you know who I am. It sounds like Jesus may be saying: "I shouldn't have to keep telling you, and showing you over and over again. There are many who are a part of my flock, a part of my group, who already understand. They recognize the truth, they know me, I know them, and they follow me." Is this Jesus being a proponent of tough love? Did Jesus say this with exasperation or in frustration? Is Jesus actually giving us an excuse to divide ourselves into groups of us vs. them?

I think not. I think Jesus said this because he was very sad.

Dakota Road Music published a song in 1989 called “Weeping over Jerusalem” that tells us about the compassionate and merciful heart of Jesus. It goes like this:

He journeyed there for the last time.  
Jerusalem, you were still so blind.  
He was the message of truth,  
but you just would not believe  
so you hung him on a tree.

He journeyed there for the last time.  
Jerusalem could not see the sign.  
He brought you healing and life,  
but you just turned him away  
and you screamed out "Crucify!"

Chorus:

He was weeping over Jerusalem.  
He was crying, tears were running down his face.  
He was weeping over Jerusalem,  
because they could not see God's grace.

He journeys to us ev'ryday.  
Jerusalem, do we walk your way?  
He wants to give us new life,  
but do we turn him away  
and do we scream "Crucify?" (Chorus)

Words and Music by Larry Olson  
©1989 Dakota Road Music.  
All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

Jesus' last words before he died were: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And three days later, he was raised from the dead.

Pope Francis released a book last fall called The Name of God is Mercy. In this book, Pope Francis says: “Jesus does not remain indifferent, he feels compassion, he lets himself be involved and wounded by pain, by illness, by the poverty he encounters. He does not back away.”

In everything that Jesus did, Pope Francis writes: Jesus “shows us... the logic of a God who is love, a God who desires the salvation of all... Jesus touched the leper and brought him back into the community. (Jesus) didn't sit down at a desk and study the situation, he didn't consult the experts for pros and cons. What really mattered to (Jesus) was reaching stranded people and saving them, like the Good Shepherd who leaves the flock to save one lost sheep. Then, as today, this kind of logic and conduct can be shocking, it provokes angry mutterings from those who are only ever used to having things fit into their preconceived notions and ritual purity instead of letting themselves be surprised by reality, by greater love or a higher standard. Jesus goes and heals and integrates the marginalized, the ones who are outside the city, the ones outside the encampment. In so doing, he shows us the way.”

Sister Joan Chittister writes that: “Compassion makes no distinction between friends and enemies, neighbors and outsiders, compatriots and foreigners. Compassion is the gate to human community.”

Sister Joan also writes: “Compassion is not sympathy. Compassion is mercy. It is a commitment to take responsibility for the suffering of others.”

The name of God is Mercy.

Yesterday morning, I had breakfast with my neighbor, Catherine. She had been to a recent meal with some friends to talk about hunger in Montgomery County, and to think about how to solve this persistent problem. All who were present at this meal were challenged to break bread with others in their community and to have conversation about “food insecurity and income disparity in Montgomery County.” When Catherine and I had breakfast together yesterday morning, one of the things we talked about was need to invite people who were suffering from “food insecurity and income disparity” to be a part of the conversation, to find out what they think the problems are, and what possible solutions would make sense to them. To move from a dynamic of client and servers to a dynamic of sharing food together, talking about what matters as friends, to sharing at a deep level what is most worrisome, and what might be a way forward that makes sense to those who are suffering... to work the problem together.

In Revelation, we heard this morning that there “was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” And they were praising God...

Then one of the elders asked..., “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

The answer: “Sir, you know... These are (the ones) who have come out of the Great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

The people standing before God, the people from every nation, tribe, people and language were ones who had all have survived “The Great Tribulation.” These people are all ones who understand the distress or suffering that results from oppression or persecution because they lived it. And they are praising God because Jesus saved them from this pain, by giving them hope, by showing them the amazing depth of God’s love for each one of them.

Gordon Cosby said that: “Compassion is to know the pain and suffering of others. Not to know *about* the suffering and pain of others, but in some way to actually know that pain – to enter it, hear it, taste it, let it in. We talk about getting in touch with our feelings, and that is central to our freedom. The complementary step is to get in touch with the feelings of others. This necessitates getting in to their frame of reference, their way of perceiving. Others’ way of seeing might seem wrong or distorted, yet it is still their experience of life. To see the way others see, to enter their inner world and feel with them, requires the development of an imaginative capacity. In part, knowing that someone understands and feels our pain *is* the relief we need, even if nothing more can be done. To know that someone feels with us the pain that we feel is to have the nature of that pain changed and made more bearable. Compassion for another’s pain will always begin individually and personally. But we also must learn to institutionalize our compassion. We should expect systems to support our desire to be more compassionate. We must move beyond personal caring to the kind of caring that creates corporate structures to combat apathy and self-seeking. Expressing compassion individually and personally is necessary, and so is creating compassionate structures for all. We can do it. There are innovative and imaginative ways that we, as spiritual entrepreneurs using technology and creative means, can stem the increasing suffering of the world. We have not yet applied all our resources to the benefit of the poor. We have not yet seen it as a fundamental command. God is in pain. We must learn to celebrate life by celebrating the God who is in love with all of life and... longs to ease the world’s pain.”

Omid Safi, a Muslim blogger for “On Being” and a professor at Duke University writes: “If we seek a life of the spirit, how do we confront social injustice, poverty, racism, sexism, living under occupation, and violence by both states and non-state entities? What do we have to say? Where do we stand with respect to those who find themselves weak and vulnerable?”

Dr. Safi continues: “If love is vessel that carries God to us, then it comes to us through our bodies. We have to love the body, honor the body, cherish the body, and protect the body. Don’t ask me about my mystical practice if the citizens of Flint have brown, goopy water. Don’t go searching for a mantra if some of us are living under occupation or have bombs

falling on them. Don't talk to me about love if a fifth of our human population goes to bed hungry at night. We cannot fill each other's hearts with love if our bellies are perpetually empty. If we wish to be one with God, we have to be one with one another. We have to want for one another what we want for our own babies. To love God, we must love humanity. To love humanity, we have to address the conditions in which we live. The dignity of human beings matters. Structures and institutions matter."

There is a Buddhist teaching about a pilgrim who was praying along the side of a road. As he prayed, he was passed by the sick and the crippled and the poor. Seeing them, the pilgrim went down into deep prayer and cried, "Great God, how is it that a loving creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?"

And out of the long silence, God replied, "I did do something. I made you."

Matthew West is a Christian singer and song-writer that Justin introduced me to. Matthew West has a song called "Do Something," with a chorus that is a compelling call to action:

If not us, then who?  
If not me and you?  
Right now, it's time for us to do something.  
If not now, then when  
Will we see an end  
To all this pain?  
It's not enough to do nothing.  
It's time for us to do something.

*I want to read to you some excerpts from a statement released on Thursday by the 80 mostly Catholic participants of a gathering on Nonviolence and Just Peace that was held at the Vatican earlier this week:*

"As Christians committed to a more just and peaceful world we are called to take a clear stand for creative and active nonviolence and against all forms of violence... in recognition of the Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis...

Our assembly, people of God from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania included lay people, theologians, members of religious congregations, priests, and bishops. Many of us live in communities experiencing violence and oppression. All of us are practitioners of justice and peace...

### **Looking at our world today**

We live in a time of tremendous suffering, widespread trauma and fear linked to militarization, economic injustice, climate change, and a myriad of other specific forms of violence. In this context of normalized and systemic violence, those of us who stand in the Christian tradition are called to recognize the centrality of active nonviolence to the vision and message of Jesus; to the life and practice of the (Catholic) Church; and to our long-term vocation of healing and reconciling both people and the planet.

We rejoice in the rich concrete experiences of people engaged in work for peace around the world, many of whose stories we heard during this conference. Participants shared their experiences of courageous negotiations with armed actors in Uganda and Colombia; working to protect the Article 9, the peace clause in the Japanese Constitution; accompaniment in Palestine; and countrywide peace education in the Philippines. They illuminate the creativity and power of nonviolent practices in many different situations of potential or actual violent conflict. Recent academic research, in fact, has confirmed that nonviolent resistance strategies are twice as effective as violent ones.

The time has come for our Church to be a living witness and to invest far greater human and financial resources in promoting a spirituality and practice of active nonviolence and in forming and training our (Catholic) communities in effective nonviolent practices. In all of this, Jesus is our inspiration and model.

## Jesus and nonviolence

In his own times, rife with structural violence, Jesus proclaimed a new, nonviolent order rooted in the unconditional love of God. Jesus called his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5: 44), which includes respecting the image of God in all persons; to offer no violent resistance to one who does evil (Matthew 5: 39); to become peacemakers; to forgive and repent; and to be abundantly merciful (Matthew 5-7). Jesus embodied nonviolence by actively resisting systemic dehumanization, as when he defied the Sabbath laws to heal the man with the withered hand (Mark 3: 1-6); when he confronted the powerful at the Temple and purified it (John 2: 13-22); when he peacefully but determinedly challenged the men accusing a woman of adultery (John 8: 1-11); when on the night before he died he asked Peter to put down his sword (Matthew 26: 52).

Neither passive nor weak, Jesus' nonviolence was the power of love in action. In vision and deed, he is the revelation and embodiment of the Nonviolent God, a truth especially illuminated in the Cross and Resurrection. He calls us to develop the virtue of nonviolent peacemaking.

Clearly, the Word of God, the witness of Jesus, should never be used to justify violence, injustice or war. We confess that the people of God have betrayed this central message of the Gospel many times, participating in wars, persecution, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination...

We need a new framework that is consistent with Gospel nonviolence... Pope Francis said “the true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible”. He has also urged the “abolition of war”.

...a Just Peace approach based on Gospel nonviolence... offers a vision and an ethic to build peace as well as to prevent, defuse, and to heal the damage of violent conflict. This ethic includes a commitment to human dignity and thriving relationships, with specific criteria, virtues, and practices to guide our actions. We recognize that peace requires justice and justice requires peacemaking.

## Living Gospel Nonviolence and Just Peace

In that spirit we commit ourselves to furthering (Catholic) understanding and practice of active nonviolence on the road to just peace. As would-be disciples of Jesus, challenged and inspired by stories of hope and courage in these days, we call on the Church we love to:

- continue developing (Catholic) social teaching on nonviolence. In particular, we call on Pope Francis to share with the world an encyclical on nonviolence and Just Peace;
- integrate Gospel nonviolence explicitly into the life, including the sacramental life, and work of the Church through dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations, and others;
- promote nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma healing, unarmed civilian protection, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding strategies);
- initiate a global conversation on nonviolence within the Church, with people of other faiths, and with the larger world to respond to the monumental crises of our time with the vision and strategies of nonviolence and Just Peace;
- no longer use or teach “just war theory”; continue advocating for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons;
- lift up the prophetic voice of the church to challenge unjust world powers and to support and defend those nonviolent activists whose work for peace and justice put their lives at risk.

In every age, the Holy Spirit graces the Church with the wisdom to respond to the challenges of its time. In response to what is a global epidemic of violence, which Pope Francis has labeled a “world war in installments”, we are being called to invoke, pray over, teach and take decisive action. With our communities and organizations, we look forward to continue collaborating with the Holy See and the global Church to advance Gospel nonviolence.”

Earlier this week, I posted on Facebook, a poem from Mary Oliver:

I believe in kindness.  
Also in mischief.  
Also in singing,  
especially when singing is not necessarily prescribed.

I've been reading, and thinking, and talking a lot about Pope Francis recently. I think he is an amazing witness for God's love. But it seems to me that he also practices a bit of holy mischief sometimes.

For example, there are reports of rumors that Pope Francis sometimes sneaks out of the Vatican at night dressed as a regular priest, to meet with homeless men and women.

Yesterday, Pope Francis returned from Lesbos Greece, and he took 12 Syrian refugees with him back to the Vatican. Over 89,000 migrants have arrived on Lesbos since January 1<sup>st</sup>, and 4,142 are currently on the island. Of these 3,060 are being held in a closed facility – from images on the news, it is an armed camp... with soldiers surrounding fences to make sure no one escapes...

Pope Francis is going to places like Lesbos around the world, to shine light on conditions that should not exist. He holds peoples' hands, hugs them, and asks them to pray for him. And he invites the press to photograph the situations in which humans suffer, and then asks the faithful to do what we can to end this suffering.

And in the midst of the world's pain and suffering, Pope Francis reminds us "And here the first word that I wish to say to you: joy! Do not be men and women of sadness: a Christian can never be sad! Never give way to discouragement! Ours is not a joy born of having many possessions, but of having encountered a Person: Jesus, in our midst."

I'd like to close with a song and a prayer. The song I've chosen is one that I think many of you may have sung as children or to your children.

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy  
Down in my heart (Where?)  
Down in my heart (Where?)  
Down in my heart  
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy  
Down in my heart  
Down in my heart to stay

And I'm so happy  
So very happy  
I have the love of Jesus in my heart (down in my heart)  
And I'm so happy  
So very happy  
I have the love of Jesus in my heart

Before we pray, I want to read you some of the other verses that Wikipedia has noted that people sing to this song, some I didn't know:

I've got the peace that passes understanding down in my heart...  
I've got the far out faith that freaks out farmers down in my heart...  
I've got the glorious hope of my blessed redeemer way down in the depths of my heart...  
I've got the mighty Messiah that manifests miracles down in the depths of my heart...  
Well, if the devil doesn't like it he can sit on a tack...

I've got the love of Jesus Christ my savior down in my heart...

I've got the wonderful love of my blessed redeemer way down in the depths of my heart...

I've got the brightest light in the depths of my heart...

I've got the infinite love of the living lord down in the depths of my heart...

I've got the love of Jesus, love of Jesus down in my heart...

I've got that opposition to conscription down in my heart..

When I pray with my boys at night before they go to bed, I pray that God will watch over them and keep them healthy and safe, and I also pray that God will help them to be kind and compassionate in each moment of their day, that they will find opportunities to share God's love.

So this is what I want to pray for us today: Holy God, please watch over this little group of your children. Keep us healthy and safe so that we have the energy to follow your call for us in the world. Help us to be kind and compassionate to everyone we meet, and help us to seek out opportunities to be witnesses and share your love in places of pain and suffering in this world. And help us to infuse those situations with love and kindness, and joy, and singing, and holy mischief where it might be helpful! Amen.