

Interview with John Dear , for “Living Peace,” Spring 2011

As a Jesuit priest, peace activist, speaker and author, John Dear has devoted his life to nonviolence. He is the 40th, and most recent, recipient of the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award, which honors a person for their work in peace and justice in the world. In 2008 Archbishop Desmond Tutu nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. (See: www.johndear.org) Recently, John took time from his busy schedule to talk to us about nonviolence and the urgent need for each of us to deepen our commitment to nonviolence.

LP: Do you make a distinction between peacemaking and nonviolence and if so what is it?

John: I don't. But that's just me. We need a new language for peace. "Nonviolence" is the word that Gandhi used. Ahimsa, from Hinduism. He used it every day, and Dr. King used it every day, so I have been using this clumsy word to describe the gospel life that Jesus calls us to live.

But the word in the Sermon of the Mount is "peacemaking"—Blessed are peacemakers—which is another good word. But the problem, I find, is that everybody is for peace. The people who build nuclear weapons at Los Alamos are great peacemakers, as far they are concerned. People at the Pentagon and the White House consider themselves peacemakers. Obama won the Nobel peace prize and he is waging three wars.

So the word "peace" is complicated, and the word "love" has been watered down so much. But the word "nonviolence" hasn't been and it means, right there, "No violence!" but that's just the beginning of the definition.

LP: At the Congregation's last Chapter, you spoke about the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. You've talked about Gandhi's devotion to the beatitudes as well as your own. As you meditate and pray and work with them, do they bring new insights all the time and take you deeper? And if that's so, how does that work?

John: Well, I think it's all very simple and very difficult at the same time, this life of peace and nonviolence. I think of nonviolence as active love and truth, working for a world without war, poverty, nuclear weapons or global warming, resisting evil and making peace with everyone. That's how I see discipleship to Jesus, too. But how do you do it?

In many ways, we are living in war. All of us are at war with ourselves, at war with everybody we know, the church is in a total war with itself and we are waging war around the world—war against the poor, the children, the earth and that means of course war against God.

I think this life of peace and nonviolence means daily, ideally hourly, ideally every minute, trying to make peace with yourself, to cultivate an interior nonviolence and then from there, to go forth and to be meticulously nonviolent toward everybody and work for a new world of nonviolence.

As you go into that process, you realize that this is not just a methodology or a political practice or strategy. It's a spirituality that takes you into a whole new understanding of God and then you

come to the conclusion, which was right there at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, that God is nonviolent. So we are talking about the process of making peace with God. I don't know which comes first, but I do know that if you sit every day in quiet meditation and read the gospels, a certain healing happens where you are disarmed of your inner violence and given a gift of peace. A spring of peace wells up within you, and also at the same time you are getting to know who God is, that God loves you, that God is healing you and making peace with you. All of this can be politically and socially transformative.

The Sermon on the Mount, I find, gives me regular new sights into this life and process of peace, disarmament and nonviolence.

LP: You have taken a vow of nonviolence and co-wrote a vow of nonviolence for Pax Christi. How do you keep renewing that vow?

John: I first thought of the vow of nonviolence when I made the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, a thirty day retreat, and after reading the life of Gandhi, in LPuary, 1983. I spent two years preparing to profess the vow and then, stupidly, woke up three weeks later, with the sudden realization that this was not the end but just the beginning! It was a terrifying moment that this was the beginning of the journey, that peacemaking, gospel nonviolence, is a life-long journey of discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus.

So if you are asking me how I nurture it and continue it, I would say there are a lot of things that I do, and that I've learned personally from peacemakers and from reading the saints. And that would include daily, quiet meditation and reading the gospel every day and participating in the sacraments. I find that that there is lot of great stuff that the Church has given us. But I don't think it can be done without a daily, formal check-in time with the God of Peace.

And my hope had always been to spend more time in meditation. But Saint Ignatius, in the early 1500s, said we just need a quiet, short, check-in time and then, go out and work for the disarmament of the planet. That's my take on it. You also need community, and that can mean all kinds of things, but ideally a group of people who share your values, with whom you can open up and share your hopes and joys and pain and brokenness.

That's really helpful. Public action is also helpful. Oddly enough, if you don't join the movement, you end up sitting back watching the bombs fall on CNN. You'll give up and give in to despair. But if you join a public vigil, or get involved in your local peace group, or volunteer at that nearby shelter for the homeless, or cross the line and get arrested in a protest, actually that generates hope and keeps you going. These actions provide opportunities for you to deepen your personal nonviolence.

Cesar Chavez once told me that nonviolence cannot be practiced privately on our own. It has to be done on the frontlines and in the streets. Otherwise it's not really gospel nonviolence. Those words haunt me. That's why I ended up going to places like Iraq and New Mexico and prison and trying to test my nonviolence. These days, as the church gets worse and the country and the world seem to be heading toward destruction, it's hard not to give into to despair and cynicism. So we need to keep our eyes on the risen, peacemaking Jesus.

I just keep doing these things and say my prayers and join community actions and share with others and build the movement and discover what faith means and watch Jesus march to Jerusalem where he will resist the empire and undergo the cross. I want the mature, active nonviolence of Jesus that goes to the cross, into total darkness and disaster, and still love and forgive everyone, in that journey to peace. That's the path to resurrection, the path to a new world of peace.

This has been a journey in faith. It's not about courage or results or effectiveness. It's about faith. Do we really trust the God of peace? Can we really give our lives for the God of Peace and God's reign of peace? Can we really follow the nonviolent Jesus and work for justice and disarmament, come what may? I think there is nothing better to give our lives for.

LP: If you believe that there is evil—things we can't control—in the world, is a nonviolent world ever even possible?

John: My thought is that with the God of Peace, anything is possible. Think of the Abolitionists. For thousands and thousands of years, there had been slavery. There was absolutely no way slavery was going to end. That was unthinkable, even unimaginable. Faith-based activists began the movement. The Abolitionists lifted up a vision of equality and gave their lives to make it come true. Grassroots movements for justice and peace that are rooted in the God of Peace and in Jesus' way of creative nonviolence, in the end, always work. They are just rarely tried.

Because of the Suffragists, women got the vote. Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement helped bring down segregation. Literally billions of people in the last 30 years have been involved in hundreds and hundreds of documented grassroots movements for nonviolent change that led to nonviolent revolutions, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Union and Mandela being released and the end of apartheid and on and on.

So I think it is possible, not only to end the evil U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to rebuild Haiti, to give universal healthcare, and to feed the hungry, but that it's actually possible to abolish war, poverty and nuclear weapons. We have to build a faith-based global movement of nonviolence and pursue that vision with all our energies.

This is the work of every Christian. Blessed are the peacemakers. They go forth, seek justice, love enemies, and make peace, which means you work to abolish war and nuclear weapons. On global warming, I'm not so sure. I've been studying it, and I do believe in the God of Peace, but we have really heaped a lot of destruction on this earth and the earth is now responding.

But that doesn't mean we give up. I don't think that's the will of God or the way of Jesus. We have to change our lives. If we all repent of our complicity and violence and destruction and beg God for the gift of peace and the end of war, nuclear weapons, poverty and global warming, I think God could give it to us.

But why should God give it to us? We don't want that. We are very happy with death, destruction, greed and war. We are quite content. We need to wake up, repent, change and tell God we want a new world of peace. Everything has to change.

LP: You have been in opposition to the church at times. How do you stay with it in light of that?

John: Well, it's a daily struggle for me. I am in a lot of trouble with a lot of church authorities—the Jesuits, Bishops and people in Rome—all because I'm against war and nuclear weapons and I speak out publicly. I've been banned from speaking about the Gospel in many places. But I just keep going back to the life of Jesus. He was rejected many times. He marched to Jerusalem and turned over the tables of the money-changers and said, "We are not going to support systemic injustice anymore; we're people of contemplative prayer and peace." You're going to get arrested, tortured and killed if you do that.

So this is the job description for anyone who wants to follow Jesus! Often we think we can have a nice, comfortable life, work for peace, and follow Jesus, but not get into trouble. That's not the Gospel story.

I think the Gospel means getting into trouble for justice and peace. Dorothy Day said that the measure of your discipleship to Jesus is how much trouble you're in for working for peace and justice. The churches are complicit in war and nuclear weapons and injustice, and if we are going to return to our roots and proclaim the gospel of peace and follow the nonviolent Jesus, we're going to get in trouble, not just with the Pentagon, but with church authorities.

I keep remembering that the whole point is to follow the nonviolent Jesus and live the Sermon on the Mount. That keeps me going. And I meet great people all over the country and the world who model the church for me. That helps me to remember that the church is not just the institution or the administrators but the Body of Christ, the community of the nonviolent Jesus which makes peace and practices universal love. The church is made up of those who do what Jesus said, who make peace, love enemies, show compassion, and practice the Sermon on the Mount. That's what being church is about.

LP: You've said we are addicted to violence as a society and there seems to be a lot of addiction of all kinds today. Do you think they are all related.

John: In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called the sons and daughters of the God of Peace. Love your enemies, then you will be sons and daughters of the God of Peace who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad, the rain fall on the just and the unjust." If you look at the end of each of those sentences, we are called to be sons and daughters of the God of peace and love.

Well, we all reject that. Nobody talks about that and few dare to think about that. We say, "There is no way I could be a son or daughter of God. That's ridiculous." That's a bourgeois cop-out; it lets us off the hook.

The great need for us in North America is to reclaim our core fundamental identity to be the beloved sons and daughters of the God of peace and love. This was something that Henri Nouwen, a friend of mine, tried to dedicate his life to. He said, "We are all beloved." Nobody knows that, nobody has been told that, nobody believes that. Everyone assumes that God is a God of war; a mean, violent, old white man who can't wait to throw us into hell.

If God is a God of unconditional love and infinite peace and is wildly in love with every human being on the planet and we are children of this beloved God, it's so freeing and healing, and gives our lives new purpose, and we can go forward and love everyone. But if you don't know that, you'll go insane with violence because you don't know who you are. Once you forget who you are or you don't even know about it, or you have six billion people who don't know that, then you have the madness of global violence. You hate yourself, or you end up planning to blow up the planet. It's all related to this core truth of who we are, and whether or not we believe that.

Addictions come from this problem of not knowing that we are God's beloved—where no one believes in God, where we're not loved, so we turn to something else to satisfy us.

Our job is to help one another discover or rediscover who we are, to claim it, to help people not to forget that they are the beloved sons and daughters of the God of Peace. As we remember that, we can be at peace with ourselves, and make peace with everyone and love universally. Once you remember that, you can begin to become sober. In all our addictions, we need new boundaries to help us be nonviolent to ourselves and others, to rely on our Higher Power, and to have a support community of love and peace. That was what the church was supposed to be about—your "Violence Anonymous" group, where you checked in, remembered who you were, repented, turned to your Higher Power, and lived new lives of nonviolence. But we are still so sick in so many ways. We have to help each other remember that God loves us and we can love one another.

LP: What if someone is being aggressive on the road and you are trying to keep calm but then you start getting angry and that ratchets up until you become violent. How can we remain calm amidst the aggression that surrounds us all the time?

John: Staying calm is a daily spiritual practice. We try to live peacefully, nonviolently, every day in every situation, and our peaceful presence helps others to be peaceful. Being a peacemaker means you have to go into the chaos of violence and be a disarming presence of peace. The Buddhists speak of growing in awareness of our inner violence, becoming more conscious of the daily violent acts we do.

So if someone attacks you, or if another car driver is aggressive to you, and you start to be violent or aggressive, you need to notice what's going on within you, notice your first reaction. I like to be gentle with myself and ask, "OK, what's going on here?" Then I try to move on to a second thought, to take a deep breath, to be calm and to remain peaceful. A violent response just aggravates the situation; it doesn't work.

We need to ask ourselves: Why am I feeling violent? Often, the situation triggers some past wound within us. So when you become calm and thoughtful, you remember that this event has

triggered something that happened two years ago that has nothing to do with this present situation. You need to be gentle with yourself, see that all of this is reasonable and realize that you do not need to respond with violence or retaliate or seek revenge because you are being more rational.

In your scenario, if somebody is tailgating you, I pull over and let them pass. There are practical things you can do. Let people pass who are in a rush. Be reasonable, be sober and don't try to keep the spiral of anger and road rage and violence going. We have to live nonviolently, and that includes driving nonviolently.

If you reflect deeply on your own road rage experience, it can lead to new healing. You can begin to see the other driver as a teacher who shows you your shadow side, who leads you to ask, "What's going on here?" This can lead you to befriend yourself again and have compassion on yourself and the other person, and to look deeply at the source of your anger so that life can become a series of moments of peace to peace to even deeper peace. So we have to deal with our violence and inner conflict and disarm it, and really allow the Holy Spirit of peace to move within us and among us.

LP: You have said the peace movement is just at the beginning and has a long way to go. When doctors are interviewed about diseases that are incurable, they are often asked to speculate on a timeline for a cure. This is very different, but do you envision any kind of timeline for an end to violence in our world?

John: I think the world's violence is getting worse and we—the United States—have brought so much death and destruction around the planet, that we're now a global empire involved in almost every nation on the planet, so that we are guaranteeing many more terror attacks here at home. Friends of mine say that use of nuclear weapons appears inevitable as does catastrophic climate change. That's why I say this call to disarm and become people of nonviolence is the most urgent, pressing need facing each one of us. This is the call of Jesus: to repent of our global violence and welcome the nonviolent reign of God. In biblical language, the time is now. The kairos has arrived. We all have to wake up and do this.

But I can't speculate on the future. I know that things are getting worse. I think we're all called to make peace, love our enemies and work for an end to war and injustice. And to teach this way of nonviolence, this vision of peace, with all our energy. We are part of a global grassroots movement of nonviolence and God is up there doing her big thing and God needs us and we need God and some of us have to give our lives for this work. That's the way my hope is. In the end, the outcome, the future, is in the hands of the God of peace.

Gandhi was clearer about a timeline. He envisioned interim peace teams, nonviolent peace armies that would go around the world, while we work to get rid of the causes of war, which are poverty and disease, which lead to violence and genocide. Over time, we should teach nonviolent conflict resolution to every child on the planet, institutionalize it, and over time, the vision of peace will come true.

The main thing is to do our part and not to give in to despair, but to keep the vision of a new world of peace alive, to place our hope in the God of peace, and to keep walking forth on the path of nonviolence. Maybe we are just sowing seeds of peace and nonviolence; someone else will reap the harvest. I think that's what Dr. King and Dorothy Day and Oscar Romero did. We have to carry on their work, and like them, sow the seeds of peace for a new future of peace.
