

Jan 28, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; Psalm 111; Matthew 5: 4, 13-16.

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Epiphany is the season of Salt and Light—and carrots and *Ranch* [salad dressing—a reference to the Children's Time lesson]. Get it? Get this. It means nothing if there's no *Ranch* flowing through us. These are not nice ideas sitting out there on the shelf. How do we “*Ranch*” it up in the world? What good is salt if it isn't salty anymore?

This is the season of wisdom, and truth, compassion, and understanding. And these 15 days we've especially celebrated—from Martin Luther King's birthday [Jan 15] to Gandhi's assassination this Tuesday, January 30th—as a season of Non-violence, and Truth, and Peace.

There is a new student in my Tai Chi class. A couple of weeks ago she said, ‘*This is really hard for me. I'm used to having control over everything in my life.*’ And I said, ‘*Yeah, you can't learn Tai Chi up in your head. It's in the heart, and in the body, and in practice, and over time.*’ ‘Geez, I don't know. I don't know if I can do it.’

This last week she came to me, and said she talked with another friend who's not in the class. She was telling her about how she has to sort of, you know, give up a little bit of control. And her friend said to her, ‘I would never take that class. I'm going to keep all the control I've got!’ And the new student said, ‘It made me think, ‘*What would happen to me if I did begin to let go, a little bit? I'm not sure what that would be like.*’

So, this is what this verse is all about today, ‘*Blessed are those who yield. Blessed are those who give way*’, who allow for a bigger context, who aren't trying to control everything, who may even let in opponents and enemies to a bigger experience of life—because you'll get to experience the whole earth as open, and potentially, friendly.

It's this verse, and the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus, who became the inspiration for Mahatma Gandhi, along with the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi often said, ‘*The only people who don't understand Jesus are the Christians. They just don't get it. They don't get what they've received.*’

And Gandhi was a quiet young man, pretty sharp. He ended up studying in England at one of those places, you know, Cambridge, Oxford, one of those places. He and George Bernard Shaw were classmates and friends—both members of the Vegetarian Society way back then, which was actually a radical political activist group. (Liberals always like food, you know. Have you noticed that?)

He graduated, returned home [to India], and got his first job in South Africa. There was a large Indian community there; they were called ‘Coloreds’ back in those days, and he had become a barrister, a lawyer. One of his assignments required him to go north in the country, so he got a First-Class train ticket, boarded—and when evening came, went back to get his berth in First Class. Now, the conductor couldn't believe that Gandhi had a First-Class ticket. ‘*This makes no*

sense.’ Now, here's Gandhi, dressed to the nines, speaking the Queen's English, a full barrister, and the conductor said, ‘*It's impossible!*’ And because Gandhi protested a little bit, the train was stopped, and the conductor literally threw Gandhi off the train at a way station. There was no town there.

And Gandhi spent the night freezing, but his imagination and understanding were ignited, because he understood for the very first time: ‘*It doesn't matter what I do, how many hoops I jump through, no matter how many credentials I prove and have, I will never be considered a human being. Never. I will never appear ‘civilized’. I will never be approved by the dominant caste. ‘You are always nobody. Just remember that, and we'll all be fine.’*’ What we hear is ‘never’, and that redirected the course of his life's path.

In time, the heart of it became the relationship of means and ends. Now, we always talk about how the ends justify the means: ‘*Do whatever it takes to get what you want, get the control.*’ But Gandhi realized, ‘*Voom! It is the reverse. It is the means, the ways in which we live our lives, how we live by the values that matter to us, that create the outcome*’—even though we may not even determine the outcome.

That's Faith. It's living into a bigger world, a bigger sense of relationship and connection with others, not me and control—as much as I love it. Letting go—to admit the presence and the reality of others, especially those who are different. ‘*They don't fit—what are we going to do about them?*’

And the very heart of the teaching was that truth and non-violence are two sides of the same coin. (Everybody has a Peace medallion? Put it in your hands now, please. Hold it at least for the rest of the homily. Did everybody get one? No? We're going to pass them around now just to make sure. This is really important. Did you guys get some? Okay, but make sure everybody gets one.)

If you've got one already, you can check out how beautiful this is—dove on one side, [the word] Peace on the other. And the reason this is so important is because it's the heart of the Gospel. Truth and non-violence are two sides of the same coin. There is no access to the truth without non-violence. Hate, bigotry, let alone war, destroy Truth, and there's no access. The means create the pathway, the trajectory of our lives.

That's why we say ‘*There is no way to peace.*’ Mmm-hmm. It's not a plan. It's not a project. There's no strategic plan behind creating peace in the world. It's by opening our hearts, living from the means, the values that we hold dear. You are the Salt; you are the Light. It's not dropping out of the heavens from someplace else.

Without Truth, of course, we can't become human. And we're living in a time which says ‘*uh, what truth is there?*’ Or, ‘*make up your own.*’ Or, ‘*whatever you want to believe...*’. It's just, ‘*what can you do about it?*’ This is insane. You can quote me on that. This is insane. Discovering the Truth, living into the Truth, giving yourself room to breathe, open possibilities—even if they throw you off the train—is essential to becoming a human being.

So, some years later, a decade plus, Gandhi's back in India, and poor farm workers had asked him for help—imposition of laws, living in poverty, people starving literally to death. Gandhi gets involved, starts a campaign, and encourages people to break a law which was oppressing people. Many began to break that law to get arrested, to go to court. And finally, they arrested Gandhi.

When he appeared before the magistrate, who was British, the magistrate was empathetic. He liked Gandhi, and he wanted to just give a light sentence, and say, '*Just don't do that anymore.*' And Gandhi stood in the docket, and said, '*Your Honor, if you truly believe that this law is just, then you must impose upon me the fullest weight possible. Because I promise you, if you leave me out, I will break this law again, and again, and again, and encourage everyone else to do the same.*' The Magistrate began to weep and weep, because he was bound (right?) by the Empire to follow the Law—and he gave Gandhi a sentence of six and a half years.

(Do you want to be in control of your life or not—six and a half years!)

Three years into his prison sentence, Gandhi had appendicitis. Now he practiced Ayurvedic medicine and would never have allowed surgery. But the British realized, '*If Gandhi dies in prison the whole country will explode; we can't let that happen.*' And so, they persuaded him to have an appendectomy, which saved his life. (Aren't these the ironies of history? Don't you just love these things?! They saved his life.) They let him out early, somewhere around four years or so.

And here, I believe, is the greatest crisis of his lifetime. He was besieged, besieged by the nation of India. "*What are we to do now? What's the next step? What should we do?*" Because people are desperate. 'We want justice today, don't we? We always want it today, as we should, and Gandhi said, '*I don't know. I don't know.*' And he continued to say that for six months, because he didn't know.

This is the harshest thing—to live inside of that disturbing unknowing—'*What are we to do?*' and to live inside of that tension. It's the harshest place. But he kept waiting for, in contemplative prayer that moment of truth to come to him, which he, like the Prophet Elijah, called a '*still small voice*'. He was listening for Wisdom.

(Can we allow ourselves two minutes to wait for Wisdom? You just go to the next email—take care of it, because everybody else will be disappointed if you aren't firing back right away, right? Wow. This is what contributes to the insanity.)

And it came to him [that] the British had imposed a very harsh tax on salt, which in a tropical climate is necessary for daily living. So, Gandhi said, 'We're going to start in a particular town 200 miles away, and we'll walk to the Indian Ocean.' And there not only hundreds, but thousands, and tens of thousands of people joined him on that march. He picked up a handful of salt from the ocean and said, '*Free India!*'

Now the British were just dumbfounded. 'What is it? What is he doing? This guy's crazy. Salt? What?' Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, broke the law, distributed the salt,

ended up in the prisons until they were overflowing. And finally, months later, the British withdrew the Salt Tax. And it was at that moment that everyone in India, including the British, knew that the power of the British was broken. **They are not in charge—we are.** ...because he listened for the Wisdom necessary. And not only that, that Movement spread.

Seventeen years later, the British withdrew from India, as Gandhi had hoped and imagined, voluntarily and as friends. '*We want them to leave as friends*' which they did, and, that movement decolonized politically all the countries around the world, throughout Africa and Asia—because he waited for the salt, and the Light, to strike him.

However, Gandhi did not participate in the Independence Celebrations. On the day of [the celebration] he was back at home. How come? Because he'd realized what he called his *Himalayan Error*. He said, '*I thought everybody was practicing satyagraha, that pressing for the truth, non-violence, in the same spirit that I was. But I found out that most of my friends, like Nehru, were using it as a political tactic to achieve what they wanted.*'—whereas, Gandhi understood it [*satyagraha*] in the fruit of his spiritual faith. He understood from the beginning that the British are friends of ours, disguised sometimes as enemies, but these too are children of God, and we are in this together.

His 'Himalayan failure'. And so, he was asked at the age of 80, 'What are you going to do now?' and he said, '*Start again.*'

On January 30, 1948, he was going to public prayer which he did every day at 5:00. And as he was strolling towards prayer, the assassin stepped out, and pulled a gun. For decades Gandhi had used a mantra. (A mantra, you know, over time seeps into your body, and becomes the heart and soul of who you are.) And so, when he was shot, the final two words of Gandhi were his mantra. He fell towards the assassin, saying '*He Ram, He Ram*' = O God, forgive.

Gandhi was certainly the finest Christian of this past century—and far beyond. Now the orthodox would be very angry with me, but I don't take this lightly, because the Truth must permeate our spiritual practices, and lives, and all the traditions of the world. The Truth must permeate, but the Truth can never be confined to just one religion.

For the life of Christ in Gandhi, thanks be to God.

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

2/2/24