

“Get Ready”

The Reverend Dr. Gary J. Percesepe

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While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” ~ Mark 14:22-26

I am pleased to be in worship with you this morning practicing my religion. When I was a boy growing up in New York, a bit undersized but full of hope, I practiced shooting baskets for hours alone on the basketball court near my house, hoping to make the team. On snowy days I brought a shovel and a broom to sweep the court so that I could practice. In order to get good at something you have to practice, you have to get ready. There was a saying that came out of the civil rights movement that said “you can’t ever start a social movement, God does that, but you can get ready.” Rosa Parks on that bus in Alabama didn’t just decide one day to do what she did, she had been trained in nonviolent direct action against oppression, and when the day came, she was ready. As my Pentecostal friends say, “She was practiced up.” The young Abraham Lincoln reading his books alone by candlelight once wrote a note to himself, “I will study and get ready and perhaps my chance will come.” Many years later a young man full of self doubt who grew up on the wrong side of town and who had watched his mother get knocked around by a drunken and abusive husband came across those words by Lincoln; his name was Bill Clinton. Long before either of these American presidents there was a Greek philosopher named Socrates who said that the unexamined life was not worth living, and surely he was right. He also said that philosophy was a kind of preparation for death, because the soul is slowly schooled to turn away from the false self, away from the things that don’t really matter, to embrace and care for the true self; *and that takes practice*, there is no royal road. All the world’s great religions teach that the path to enlightenment comes only at great cost, and involves turning away from the illusions that bedevil us. In his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that when Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die. Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church, he wrote; we are fighting today for costly grace. O Friends, listen! We die a bit every day. We are called upon to give up the illusions which have sustained us. As we get older we count up our losses, and we are aware that we are losing farther, losing faster; as poet Elizabeth Bishop puts it, the art of losing isn’t hard to master.

What does it mean to be a Christian? I don’t think of my religion as defined exclusively by a set of beliefs. I was reminded of that quip someone made about how the Gallup poll ought to ask people, “What religion are you currently not practicing.”

I’m conflicted about the word Christian. I’m reminded of Maya Angelou, who, when something told her that she was a Christian, was heard to respond, **Already?** For myself, I am trying to understand in my daily life what it might possibly mean to be a follower of

Jesus the radical Christ. Surely, for those who try this, it means that we are a community trying together to respond to a call that comes from outside of ourselves and invites us to pursue a certain way of life. Yes, for us it involves beliefs, but it is a set of beliefs that we seek to put into practice. For that we have to practice religiously, we have to get ready, and that is why we gather to worship. Worship at its best does more than inspire us, it transforms us. True worship transfigures and transforms the way we live; it changes the way we view life's challenges, changes what truly matters to us and the way we see ourselves and others. It is not a pep rally in which we get ourselves all pumped up to go on and continue the way we have already been living. Such a conception of worship can do no more than perpetuate the status quo. *There is already enough of that!* It is more than spiritual motivation or marketing programs designed around survival of the mainline institutional church or denominational structures. No, *worship is about vision and hearing*. At its best, worship gives us new eyes and ears and mouths to see and hear and speak what could not have been said before.

When we come to understand worship in this way we will no longer say things like, "We go to church to worship on Sunday and then we go back out into the 'real world.'" This hackneyed expression gets it all backwards. *Worship IS the real world.* At its most profound, worship is a way of entering the world as it really looks in its full, transparent reality, a place where we hear and see and experience what is genuinely true, and unmask the illusions of the world outside. As we practice our religion we become better equipped to decode and decry the illusion that life is sustainable through war, the illusion that we must fight a war to end all war, the illusion that violence is redemptive, the illusion that "our" violence is somehow better than "their" violence, the illusion that one nation can live in security when others have none, the illusion that the haves have a right to lord it over the have-nots, the illusion that peace is a pipe dream unattainable in the so-called "real world," the illusion that the young have no wisdom to impart to their elders, the illusion that life taken is better than life given, and the illusion that we can know the meaning of life without first encountering the meaning of our own impending death.

Or the illusion that those who practice a faith different than our own have nothing to teach us as Christians.

Some years ago I started an interfaith direct action justice organization working on issues of justice and fairness in our community. We were Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. We had often worshipped together. One day I couldn't find the phone number of my friend Marianna Gevirtz, the Reform Jewish rabbi at Temple Sholom, so I called the vice president of our organization, the Imam at the Nation of Islam congregation down the street. And when I got him on the phone, he laughed at me. And I said, Mustafa, what's up with that, why are you laughing? And he said, Gary, do you know what you just did? And I said, No, what? And he said, here you are, a Christian, right, and you just called the black Muslim to get the phone number of the white Jewish rabbi! And we laughed together, amused and grateful that the walls were coming down all over town because we'd chosen to get serious about practicing our faith, leaning to do it together.

I once went to hear Elie Weisel speak and was greatly helped as a young Christian when I heard him say to someone who questioned interfaith work that to the extent that he was a good Jew he hoped that this would make it easier for me to be a better Christian.

While he was in South Africa for 23 years, Gandhi rejected the efforts of Christians to convert him. One day he had gone to hear his friend Charles F. Andrews preach and was not allowed in the church because of the color of his skin! This experience and others like it convinced him that the way he saw Christians living did not correspond to the way of Jesus. Gandhi wrote, "I consider Western Christianity in its practical working a negation of Christ's Christianity. I cannot conceive Jesus, if he was living in the flesh in our midst, approving of modern Christian organizations, public worship, or modern ministry. If Christians will simply cling to the Sermon on the Mount, which was delivered not merely to the peaceful disciples but a groaning world, they would not go wrong."

Gandhi was once asked by a NY Times reporter what he thought of western civilization. The playful Gandhi responded, "I think it would be an excellent idea!"

One day Gandhi was asked by E. Stanley Jones, a well known Christian minister who loved India and had worked there many years, how he could make Christianity natural in India, not a foreign thing identified with a foreign occupying government and a foreign people, but a part of the national life of India and contributing to its social uplift. Gandhi's answer is instructive. He responded, "First, I would suggest that all of you Christians must begin to live more and more like Jesus Christ. Second, practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, emphasize love and make it your working force, for love is central in Christianity. Fourth, study the non-Christian religions more sympathetically to find the good that is within them, in order to have a more sympathetic approach to the people." According to Jones, Gandhi understood that Christians should "make the Cross operative in the political and economic as well as the religious spheres of life." "This," said Jones, "is the deepest challenge that has ever come to the Christian world, for it means nothing less than abandoning the whole war system and adopting *Satyagraha—the philosophy and practice of nonviolence*-- instead."

Although he never became a Christian, Gandhi throughout his life maintained a profound respect for the meaning of the cross. He reminded Christians and people of all faiths that God did not bear the cross only 2000 ago, but bears it still today and God dies and is resurrected from day to day." Gandhi also expressed this belief in his identification with Christ's crucifixion and in his great love for the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." (Sing)

Jesus offers the world a better way. Jesus taught that there are more than two options, fight or flight, there is a Third Way. The Third Way that Jesus offers is the way of forgiveness and reconciliation, the way that acknowledges evil but seeks to transform it through the healing power of love, even love of one's enemies. The Jesus Way says no to strategies of domination, and to the Domination System itself, which sustains itself through violence and through the perpetuation of economic inequalities. Jesus offered in its place relationships built on non-domination, non-violence, equality, and trust. It is a

lesson the world has yet to learn. The world will learn it only through the church. Unfortunately, the Myth of Redemptive Violence seems to be the real religion of the American churches. Sadly, the churches have not been able to even agree among themselves that the Domination System is wrong, because like the nations too many churches continue to believe in the "Myth of Redemptive Violence," the illusion that violence is an eternal and immutable law of the universe, and non-violence is impractical, cowardly, and unrealistic. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Dr. King said that "Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows"

Rachel Corrie was a 23 year old American college student who went to the occupied territories to get in the way of the Domination system of violence that terrorizes that region. She worked with the Palestinian children in the hovels of Rafah, one of the poorest places on the planet. Over six hundred Palestinian children have been killed since the violence of the Israeli occupation; the Israelis have lost hundreds of their own, including children, to the violence of Palestinian suicide bombers, desperate to kill. It is a kind of madness; there seems to be no end to the killing. Rachel, weeping for the children, puts the only thing she had-- her own body-- in the path of an American made bulldozer trying to save a Palestinian home. She was run over twice, murdered in plain view, clearly visible to the driver. The Israeli driver was cleared of all wrongdoing by the "authorities." Her murder failed to elicit outrage in her home country.

Rachel Corrie is the reason I went to work for the Baptist Peace Fellowship.

For many years I was a college philosophy professor, and after that, a pastor. And then Rachel Corrie got in the way of the illegal Israeli Occupation and was brutally murdered, and something turned over in me. I can't explain exactly why her death had such a profound effect on me, when so many Palestinians and Israelis had already died, when they continue to die. Maybe it was because she reminded me of so many of my own students through the years, with their smooth unlined skin, their shy smiles and their big dreams, idealistic and hopeful. Maybe it is because I have a daughter myself, Rachel's age. When Rachel died I remember thinking: Where were her elders? People my age? More to the point, where was I?

So I went to Palestine/Israel, to the occupied territories, and lived among Palestinians and Israelis for a time. It was here that I learned that when we live among those regarded as our enemies, when we get to know them, and befriend them in the spirit of Christ, we discover the truth of what Gandhi said, that nonviolence is nothing new, it is as old as the hills. This is the only true path to security for there will be no security for anyone on earth until there is security for everyone on earth. A national security program founded on lies, secrecy, hatred, or revenge simply cannot work. Gandhi told the British the truth, and it worked. At the height of the British occupation of India, Gandhi had the nerve to say to the British, "You will leave this country, but you will leave voluntarily, and you will leave here as friends." We see the wisdom of this approach when we contrast it to the three military occupations that the U.S. is sustaining today, in Palestine, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq. Peace cannot come through the barrel of a gun; it comes with the laying

down of weapons and the embracing of separated peoples who have become friends. *Coercive power* cannot compete with *cooperative power*. If you treat me as an enemy I will be an enemy; if you treat me as a friend I will be a friend.

That is why Rachel Corrie left college to go to Rafah. We echo the plea of Rachel this morning, in an email she sent her mother hours before she died: "*This has to stop. I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop. I don't think it's an extremist thing to do anymore. I still really want to dance around to Pat Benetar and have boyfriends and make comics for my coworkers. But I also want this to stop.*"

Rachel had a vision of a time of human flourishing, of peace married to justice, of rebuilt homes and dwellings fit to live in, rather than 30 foot Apartheid Wall that separate peoples. She had talked to the Israeli bulldozer operator in the days before she was killed, and befriended him. She was a living witness to the creative possibilities of hope and trust, and in the way that she offered her body, the only thing she had to give, armed only with bare hope, she is a Christ figure for our time—a symbol of *life given, not taken*.

I am slowly coming to understand that our lives are not our own, that there is One we do not know, who has a prior claim on us. The One we do not know gently calls to us, never coercing, in a voice of love, but firmly, and with respect for our fragile condition. *While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'* In the reading from the gospel we hear the voice of this One, who has gone on ahead of us, and the voice says four things: we are *taken*, we are *blessed*, we are *broken*, and we are *given* to the world. As it was for Jesus, so it is for us. Our lives are not our own, we are taken. We are blessed. And then, just as surely as that One, we are broken by the harsh realities of the world. And then—joy beyond measure—we are given back to the world, as its life sustaining force, and bread for the world.

Rachel Corrie was taken. I watched a video of Rachel when she was a young girl, maybe ten years old. She was giving a class report on hunger and poverty, and what we could do about it. She offered the world a better way. As I watched the video of Rachel I turned to the woman next to me, and said, "She was really an old soul, wasn't she?" And this woman nodded and said to me, "Can you imagine what it must have been like as a parent, to have a child like that?" At this point, I had yet to meet Cindy & Craig Corrie, so I thought for a moment, and then I asked, "What would it be like?" And she said, "You would have to know how to give her up, that she doesn't belong to you, but to the world."

Rachel Corrie was taken, but so are we. Our lives are not our own. We have a higher calling, to witness creatively to the presence of justice and peace and goodness in the world, and to never stop hoping and dreaming and working for that world we all know is possible. Rachel Corrie was taken, and she was blessed. And then, in Rafah, her beautiful body was broken, and she was then *given* back to us, a martyr.

We must answer the violence of our world with non-violence, and claim the gift of peacemaking that is written on our hearts, in our true selves, and starve the fear and hatred and the desire for revenge that that persists in our false selves.

Like the women of Lockerbie, Scotland.

One day in December the sky exploded and the remains of Pan Am Flight 103 fell upon Lockerbie, Scotland. Among the many horrors one stood out for its seeming insignificance: what to do about the 11,000 articles of clothing belonging to the victims? The clothing was filthy and stained with jet fuel, clothing that carried the stench of death; the authorities called the clothes "contaminated" and decided that it must be incinerated. But the women of Lockerbie prevailed upon the U.S. government to release the clothing to them. Over one year's time, 11,000 items of clothing were cleaned and then washed in streams before being packed and shipped back to the families.

When asked why they had done this, one Lockerbie woman explained that every act of evil must be turned into an act of love.

Dear Friends, this is the good news. Thanks be to God.

Amen.