March 19, 2017

3rd Sunday of Lent
Ex 17:3–7
Ps 95:1–2, 6–7, 8–9
Rom 5:1–2, 5–8
Jn 4:5–42

By Don Timmerman

Today’s Gospel shows again Christ’s belief that good should be done, even if others disagree and even threaten us for doing it. Christ was very clear about His anger against injustice, oppression and lack of respect for human dignity. In the Gospel today we see Christ talking to a woman, which was against Jewish law. The law held that women were “second class citizens,” and as a non-Jew, she was also unclean and a sinner. Jesus, in an effort to correct these beliefs, talked to the woman anyway. The reason the Samaritan woman became a believer in Christ was because of Christ’s extending his friendship to her. She was amazed at his knowledge and goodness, and she then came to believe his message of love for all, including our enemies. A hero is one who makes his/her enemy a friend.

This was just one of many ways he upset many “good” Jews. Other Lenten Gospel readings provide other examples of why Christ was murdered by the Jews and Romans, such as his cleansing of the Temple. Seeing people make money off the poor angered Christ, and he chased these greedy merchants from the Temple. One wonders how the public viewed Jesus after he did this. I am sure many saw Jesus as a lunatic, a fool who had no authority to do what he did.

Some Christians today wish to follow Christ’s example. When they see injustice, oppression and disrespect they try and counter them. Many Christians have done illegal things for the same reason Christ did. Some have poured their blood at the Pentagon to show their opposition to American troops going overseas to kill and maim those named enemies by the U.S. government and corporate lobbyists. Others have used hammers to damage weapons used to kill others. Yet others refuse to pay federal taxes, realizing that almost 50 percent of tax money goes toward war and oppression of countries that do not do the US’ bidding. Those who act out like Christ to demand that we act justly indeed suffer consequences for speaking out with their actions and words. They are often called fools who should be obeying the government and military rather than Christ.

“To be true followers of Jesus includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.” So proclaimed Pope Francis on January 1, 2017. The implications of this for the institutional Catholic Church and for individual Catholics are seismic and sweeping. The institutional Catholic Church and at least 95% of all Catholics today believe that violence and war may be activities in which they are morally permitted to engage in when called upon by the state to do so. Nonviolence as an essential element of true discipleship represents an about-face, a tectonic alteration of the content of Catholic consciousness, conscience and behavior.
Recently, I was arrested for trying to close down the ROTC at Marquette University, because of my belief that no Christian institution should host the military on campus, giving the impression that it is a Christian way of acting. Christ was very clear about loving one’s enemies and doing good to them. I believe no Christian institution should be teaching that it is Christian to kill or harm others for anyone, especially the State. Like the sellers of animals in the Temple, the State ignores Christ’s commands because of love of money. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, Christians need to be the conscience of the State, not its servant.

The consequence for trying to close the ROTC is jail time and large fines, which I am willing to accept. This will not deter me from trying to rid our society of armed soldiers, weapons and destruction. Nor will I ever pay taxes that will be used to violate Christ’s command. No one suffered greater consequences for practicing His teaching than Christ did. He suffered the consequences of showing compassion and forgiveness. We too must take up the Cross. We must speak out against the discrimination, violence, greed, selfishness in our society, and suffer the consequences for doing so.

Many American Christians believe Christ’s chasing money changers out of the Temple was a sign that Christ believed that violence is necessary and acceptable as a means to keep people in line. This was never the teaching of Christ. The whole New Testament shows us Christ to be an ever merciful, forgiving, loving, healing person. His teaching was never to do violence to anyone, no matter who they are. He told Peter, after he tried to protect Jesus by cutting off the ear of the Roman soldier who came to arrest him, “Put your sword away. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.” Everyone who believes in Jesus must put away the sword. “What you do to the least of these you do also to Me.” When we go to war and bomb and kill others we are doing the same to Christ. If we refuse to do violence to others and non-violently try to right the wrongs of the world we will have peace. We will be called foolish, stupid, and other vile names. Sometimes we will be taken to court and imprisoned. But we know that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is strength than human strength.” If we are not persecuted, vilified or made to suffer we need to ask if we are truly following the way of Christ. As this Lenten season continues we come to the well like the Samaritan woman to increase our faith and commit ourselves to following Christ’s message of love for all.

Don Timmerman is a member of the Casa Maria Catholic Worker community in Milwaukee.