

Jesus and Civil Disobedience

Mohandas Gandhi, the great twentieth century apostle of nonviolence, once wrote that "Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. This was nonviolence par excellence."(1) Gandhi's insight uncovered a radical truth about Jesus' life: Jesus was a peacemaker who time and time again broke the laws that oppressed people and kept them slaves to injustice. Jesus was not just provocative; his actions were illegal, civilly disobedient and divinely obedient.

Jesus was a nonviolent resister; indeed, a steadfast practitioner of nonviolent civil disobedience--a troublemaker, par excellence. His entire life led up to the culminating confrontation with the powers of his day, symbolized in the oppressive cult of the Temple system. His civil disobedience in the Temple provoked the ruling authorities to arrest Jesus. They were afraid that his followers among the poor in the countryside would try to do likewise. So, he was imprisoned, tried, interrogated, tortured, and publicly executed by the ruling authorities. After his murder--through the legal channel of the death penalty--Jesus rose from the dead, another act in his series of nonviolent acts of civil disobedience to the imperial/religious authorities. His resurrection was nonviolent and illegal; indeed, totally outside of the law and its "principalities and powers."

Did Jesus know that he was heading for trouble? Didn't anyone advise him about the danger he was heading toward? Didn't anyone say to him, "Don't do this! If you do this, you will surely be in trouble!"? Couldn't Jesus have stayed away from Jerusalem? Couldn't he have avoided those troublemaking encounters with the authorities? Why did Jesus make such a scene, such a decision? Why did he provoke such trouble? Why was Jesus civilly disobedient?

One of the critical points in Jesus' life, according to the Gospel of Luke, was the moment Jesus turned and began the campaign to Jerusalem, where in the Spirit of Love and truth, he would confront the Temple and all it represented. "As the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road for Jerusalem and sent messengers ahead of him."(Luke 9:51)

The evangelists are clear on this point: Jesus was deliberate. His disciples tried to talk him out of going to Jerusalem, but Jesus would hear none of that. He went to Jerusalem, fully conscious of the implications and consequences. He would speak the truth, dramatically, symbolically, at the center of the culture of death. He would turn over the tables of that culture, if necessary, but he would speak. He would insist on the truth. He would be obedient to God's will. He would make himself available to all. He was willing to be rejected, willing to risk his life, but he would go and speak up for what was right.

Jesus was a walking force of nonviolence. He was the living Spirit of the reign of nonviolence, walking in the kingdom of violence. He lived the truth, and in his death, became Truth--the Christ, the Human One (as Ched Myers translates, "Son of Man"). His actions were the committed response of someone on fire with love and truth. Thus, he was dramatic. He was symbolic. And he was willing to stand up to the principalities and powers and face every level of violence, including arrest, jail, trial, torture, and death by crucifixion. As a force of nonviolence, he would confront all these evils and overcome them through suffering love.

Two thousand years later, after millions of women and men have lived and died "worshipping" the person Jesus as the Christ, "the Anointed One of God," the world continues its mad addiction to violence. In the nuclear age, suffering has taken on mass proportions not seen in earlier history. Millions of human beings starve to death while others, living well off, spend their energies on war

and weapons of war, planning to inflict suffering on every living creature. Few followers of Jesus dare to take the road to Jerusalem in their own lives. This is understandable: the consequences are still as severe as in Jesus' day--arrest, imprisonment, torture and execution.

Under the twentieth century leadership of Gandhi, Day, King and others, a new strength has been given to Christians and truth seekers regarding the road to Jerusalem. What Jesus revealed was a Spirit committed to love and truth and a way to live out that Spirit in a world of hostility and untruth. Jesus' life, words and actions are the way of nonviolent resistance.

Gandhi, Day and King opened up that way again in the twentieth century, enlightening and revealing the truth of Jesus' journey in a new and deeper fashion for many people. From the experience of arrest and imprisonment for active peacemaking in our own day and age, from the lessons we learn from Gandhi, Day and King and other peacemakers, we can reread the Gospel through the eyes of nonviolence. From this new perspective, this new hermeneutic relearned from the court and the jail cell, the Gospel of Jesus reads as a manifesto of nonviolent civil disobedience to systemic violence and societal sin. It becomes clearer that the Gospel of Jesus commands active nonviolence. Everything in Jesus' life is seen as one illegal act of peacemaking after another. Jesus was stubborn, insistent and determined: he would do everything he could, even if that meant going outside imperial and "religious" law, to reveal the reign of God. Once we understand the world as a reign of violence into which God is bringing forth God's reign of nonviolence, Jesus' life becomes a testimony of nonviolent civil disobedience as a way to challenge the kingdom of violence and death.

The Birth of Jesus as an Act of Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

The incarnation of God into human history, from this perspective of active nonviolence, is itself an act of civil disobedience. According to human law and imperial rules, God is not allowed to become human. God was supposed to stay God. God was supposed to remain in the image we humans created God to be: mean, violent, unjust, judgmental, imperial, warlike, awesome--like us. If God were to be born into poverty, humility and suffering, into a life of active love and nonviolent resistance, it would be recognized by the powerful and elite as a judgment upon themselves (albeit the most sublime, nonviolent yet powerful judgment ever). The birth of Jesus, the Anointed One of God, even in a humble stable, into terrible poverty, into the world of a refugee family, into an oppressed region of a vicious empire, is illegal.

In their attempt to justify their perspectives on the life of Jesus, Matthew and Luke show how poorly received his coming among us was. The mother of Jesus, in the words of Luke, proclaimed that God "has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent empty away." In Matthew's account, King Herod was so enraged by the news of the birth of "the Christ," that he ordered the murder of every male child under two years old, in the region of Bethlehem. The ruling authorities were trying to kill Jesus before he was even born! They realized that his power would challenge their own worldly power; like others, they mistakenly expected a militaristic messiah who would violently overthrow the systems of oppression and injustice. Though Herod and his religious supporters misunderstood the nature of the messianic Jesus, who would wield the power of nonviolence and the power of powerlessness, they were right to expect a challenge from Jesus. The nonviolent Jesus would indeed set in motion the transformation of the world.

Jesus in Galilee: Organizing the Poor for Nonviolent Resistance

Korean liberation theologian, Ahn Byung Mu suggests that it is extremely telling that Jesus went to Galilee and began preaching the reign of God after John was arrested (Mark 1:14). Ahn maintains that Mark wanted to set Jesus within the political context of the spiritual, nonviolent revolution which John proclaimed, and for which he suffered and died. Jesus deliberately followed in those footsteps. In Mark's Gospel, the earliest and closest to the original Spirit of Jesus, he took center stage after the political prologue of John the Baptist.

The region of Galilee where Jesus began his public lifework would have been markedly different from first world life in the United States. It was the outskirts of the Roman empire; a state of constant terror and oppression; a territory of poor, farming people who were victimized by the Roman and Jewish leaders. Indeed, Galilee would resemble the war-torn countryside of Central America or Africa, where any semblance of activity on behalf of social change is considered revolutionary and subversive. In such places, one is grateful to have survived another day.

Eleven Episodes of Civil Disobedience

The Gospels portray Jesus as acting publicly to reveal the reign of God present in the world. They present a series of actions that build up to a crescendo in Jerusalem, where Jesus commits his greatest action, turning over the tables in the Temple, an act of peaceful, nonviolent, loving disobedience and truth-telling. All his actions vary in focus and intensity; all are illegal and draw the ire of the ruling and religious authorities. But (according to the synoptic Gospels) it is the Temple action which leads to his arrest and execution. After his death, through the power of God, Jesus commits still another illegal act: he rises from the dead, and sets out inspiring people to the same series of subversive nonviolent acts. His life is beyond our wildest dreams; but he says to us, "Believe it. Come, follow me as I turn over the tables of this culture of death." Jesus commands his followers to do as he did, to follow the spirit in the reign of nonviolence in its challenge to the kingdom of violence and oppression, as Jesus did, even to the point of death, and then beyond, to resurrection. Let us examine, according to the synoptic Gospels, ten major episodes which I would consider to be actions of nonviolent civil disobedience by Jesus, followed the eleventh, the nonviolent act of resurrection.

I would consider Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the reign of God in general, and his reading from the book of Isaiah in the local synagogue in particular, as subversive acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. The precise nature or character of this revolutionary subversion is simply the proclamation of the truth. Prophetic truth-telling in an imperial, violent society which oppresses the poor and marginalized is always civilly disobedient and risky. The truth is outlawed. Calling for justice and peace--not to mention a jubilee year--can only provoke arrest or assassination in such a state. When Gandhi announced the start of massive, large-scale civil disobedience against British domination in India, he was arrested by the British--before he did any action. His words themselves were subversive and illegal. Jesus will eventually be charged with the same seditious activity: proclaiming to be a leader, the "king" of the Jews and stirring up the people with his ideas. I think that such truth-telling can thus be considered one form of nonviolent civil disobedience. Jesus started off this way and he was in trouble from the start.

As the historian Josephus noted, Nazareth itself was the site of a small rebellion by a handful of people in the early part of the first century. In response to this subversion, the king ordered the crucifixion of two thousand men along the road leading out of Nazareth. It is important to remember that such a setting--a land of oppression and fear, a land of crucifixion--was the area where Jesus went public with his message of salvation and the coming reign of God. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel," Jesus

declared.(Mk. 1:15) Such words could not be anything but subversive within the context of Palestine in the Roman empire. Although Jesus' words went beyond the politics of this world into God's realm, the ruling authorities rightly recognized that their political authority was at stake. Jesus would have nothing to do with their violent, military rule; his God would reign, but through nonviolent love. Just as the prophetic proclamation of the truth by Oscar Romero and Ignacio Ellacuria in the violent world of El Salvador was a dangerous threat to the authorities, so too, Jesus' proclamation was a serious challenge to the "principalities and powers."

Luke's account of Jesus' first public appearance in the synagogue at Nazareth describes an explosive scene. Jesus chose to read from the book of Isaiah, and deliberately picked the prophetic, political vision of a reign of justice. He "found the place where it was written":

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."(Lk. 4:17-19)

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he announced. This declaration was revolutionary: the announcement of the beginning of God's nonviolent revolution. To enact "a jubilee year," (as Isaiah refers, in the original translation, to Leviticus 25), would mean the complete upheaval of the entire class structure. The poor would receive justice; the entire economic system of land ownership would be reordered. His words were revolutionary. They so enraged the people, who did not want to admit their faults and their need for repentance and conversion to justice, that they immediately tried to kill him. "And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong." The proclamation of Isaiah's words were, then, according to Luke, Jesus' first act of nonviolent civil disobedience. The same could be said of Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the proclamation of the reign of God. Like anyone who speaks the truth in rural El Salvador, Haiti or other places of oppression, the truth-teller draws unto him/her-self all the hostility of the unjust system. Jesus was lucky to have survived what may have been his first public words!

After calling the disciples Simon, James and John, (according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke), Jesus began teaching "as one who had authority." His first action was a public exorcism of a man with an unclean spirit in the Capernaum synagogue. This incident portrays Jesus disrupting the cultic atmosphere of the synagogue to reach out to someone in need of his compassion and love. The crowds are "amazed" at Jesus for his daring action. This exorcism account explains the effect of Jesus' subversive proclamation upon his listeners. He exorcised the culture's possession of their lives and liberated them to a new way of life. The inner change and acceptance of Jesus' message meant that people would be "convulsed," turned inside-out, as the unclean spirit of imperial violence which had been internalized, came out of people with a loud cry.(Mk. 1:23-26) Because nations and empires by their powerful nature--their evil spirit--seek to control every aspect of people--even their very souls--an active word of love and truth which liberates and transforms people from the darkness of violence into the light of nonviolence, could be considered a kind of spiritual civil disobedience. Jesus "cleansed" the person from the unclean spirit of violence and death which possessed him. The healed person now stood (with Jesus) in resistance to the culture. Later, Jesus would "cleanse" the Temple. Both actions were amazing--and ultimately, illegal. From the personal to the societal level, Jesus would challenge the power of violence and death. For this first action itself, he was not arrested. He simply "arose and left the synagogue," we are

told. But his provocative truth-telling and subversive exorcisms set the course for political confrontation.

A second action of civil disobedience was the healing of the leper. This act was civilly disobedient because it went beyond the designated boundaries of society, from those nebulous areas where some people are considered "insiders," to those clear-cut, off-limits places where others are declared "outsiders." In Jesus' day, lepers were "untouchables," a marginalized people cordoned off from society. One did not associate with lepers because they were believed to be "unclean" and cursed by God. According to the synoptic Gospels, Jesus deliberately touched the leper who came begging to him, and in doing so, Jesus broke the sociological and religious barriers of society. He became a "leper" himself. Jesus was now a marginalized outsider: he had violated all the taboos. He too was now unclean. Such a violation was civilly disobedient on a social level but also broke specific religious laws of behavior. Gandhi's association with the "untouchable" caste of India exemplifies this scene. By renaming them as "harijans," ("the children of God"), befriending them, living with them, and adopting their cause as his own, Gandhi challenged the entire cultural foundation of Hindu India, a challenge that alone could have provoked his arrest and death. While many might have wanted to arrest Jesus for this subversive activity, and while some people Maya have been jailed and killed for doing precisely this kind of outreach to lepers, Jesus, again, was not arrested on this charge.

A third set of illegal actions would include Jesus' dinners with the marginalized and "outsiders" of society. The Gospels make plain that Jesus regularly mingled with "sinners and tax collectors." Other outsiders that Jesus repeatedly associated with included prostitutes, the sick, the dying, the hungry, widows, women, fishermen, and children. Such "criminal" people violated the law because they could not keep the standards of cleanliness or because they were thought (by those in power) to have incurred the wrath of God. Following the insights of scripture scholar, Joachim Jeremias, Ahn Byung Mu writes:

Jeremias points out that the sinner in Jewish society was defined in two ways. One was a publicly recognized criminal (an offender against the law), and the other was a person in a lowly position, i.e. a socially unacceptable occupation as defined in those days. He differentiates these two and says that the latter was despised because of "immoral conduct of life" or "dishonorable occupation." But the reason why the occupation made a person a sinner was because the occupation violated the law, either directly or indirectly, and not because of the occupation itself. These were persons who could not rest on the Sabbath day because of the character of their occupations (boatmen, shepherds and prostitutes). Or, persons who were ill-smelling or those who had to handle things defined as impure (leather-makers, coppersmiths and butchers). They were alienated and could not participate in worship.... Even persons who could not fulfill the requirements of the law because of sickness or poverty were also designated sinners. The notion that sickness was the result of crime was pervasive in Judaism. In particular, lepers, hemophiliacs and the mentally ill were regarded either as unclean according to the law or as those upon whom the wrath of God had come. These are not really criminals, but were forced into these situations because of outside pressures and religious-social thinking. Poverty also brought about this condition for it prevented people from keeping the Sabbath or the law of cleanliness.... Both persons defined according to their occupations and those who were criminals were forcibly marginalized and alienated by the system. They were sinners because they violated the law or could not adapt

themselves to the system of the law. From this standpoint, religious sin and social alienation were really two sides of the same coin.(2)

Jesus took an active "preferential option for the poor and the marginalized," and this partiality got him into trouble repeatedly. In Mark 3:34, Jesus declared his total union with the poor and oppressed around him by announcing that they were "his mother and his sisters and brothers." Jesus saw himself as one with the outcast, marginalized poor.

In the story of Levi's call to discipleship (Mt. 9:9-13; Mk. 2:13-17; Luke 5: 27-32), Jesus dined with a social outcast. We are specifically told that Levi was "the tax collector." Then, we are told, Jesus "sat at table in his house" with "many tax collectors and sinners sitting" with him "for there were many who followed him."(Mk. 2:15) Such behavior would have infuriated the righteous Pharisees and other authorities of the dominating class. By eating a meal with the marginalized, Jesus elevated them to the most sacred level of intimate relationship--as a brother or sister at table. Eating a meal with someone in the Jewish culture of ancient Palestine was a spiritual act. By sitting at table with a tax collector, sinners, and other public outcasts, Jesus must have shocked everyone. Jesus publicly embraced all those excluded by societal laws. His meal with Levi could also be considered, therefore, illegal, in its own right.

A fourth series of civilly disobedient actions could include all the public acts of working and healing that take place on the Sabbath. From the disciples' "illegal" plucking of grain on the sabbath (Mk. 2:23-28; Mt. 12:1-8; Lk. 6:1-5), to the healing of the man with the withered hand on the sabbath (Mt. 12:9-14; Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 6:6-11), to the healing of a woman on the sabbath (Lk. 13:10-17), to the healing of the man with dropsy, (a disease marked by swelling and fluid buildup) (Lk. 14:1-6), Jesus challenges the entire religious structure that oppresses the poor in the name of God.

According to Jewish law, the poor were legally allowed to glean from the fields. Jesus' disciples were caught plucking heads of grain on the sabbath; their violation of the sabbath law prohibiting all "work" provoked offense. Jesus' followers were doing what was natural and they did it with Jesus' approval. They were hungry, so they ate the grain from the fields. It is very significant then that the first public action of the disciples, according to Mark's Gospel, was to break the law.(2:23-24)(3) The Pharisees, according to each synoptic account, were outraged that, contrary to the law, "work" was being done on the sabbath. They immediately asked: "Why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" Jesus' responded with a reference to a biblical account of civil disobedience, of religious disobedience by none other than David himself. "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?"(Mk. 2:25-26) Matthew adds another example: "Have you not read in the law how on the sabbath the priests in the Temple profane the sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here. And if you had known what this means 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.(Mt. 12:5-7) Jesus defended their act of disobedience by citing the primacy of mercy in light of human need. "The sabbath was made for people," Jesus asserts, subordinating sabbath observance to human needs, "not people for the sabbath." Such mercy is politically dangerous and illegal, for in the world of greed, power, and profit, there is no mercy. There are only rules, laws, and regulations to be blindly obeyed. Jesus' healing deeds turned over the tables of his oppressive religious culture.

This sabbath episode exposes the hunger of the poor who can not afford the luxury of observing a sabbath law. Besides deflating the Pharisaic holiness code, the Gospel writers expose the politically revolutionary questions of land and food, as Myers writes:

The disciples' commandeering grain against Sabbath regulations must from this perspective be seen as a protest of "civil disobedience" over the politics of food in Palestine. Jesus is not only defending discipleship practice against the alternative holiness code of Pharisaism, he is going on the offensive, challenging the ideological control and the manipulation of the redistributive economy by a minority whose elite status is only aggrandized. Mark consistently argues that solidarity with the poor also means addressing oppressive structures. This may well mean breaking the law, but such action is legitimated by the Human One, who in overturning the authority of purity and debt codes is being revealed to the reader not only as "lord of the Sabbath" but lord of the entire "house" itself (13:35).(4)

What is most significant about these sabbath actions, in particular, the healing of the man with the withered hand, is their public nature and the pointed questions which Jesus asks as he heals the poor. Jesus denounces the religious culture's inability to heal the poor and broken. By making others whole and by doing so publicly, Jesus reveals the corrupt nature of structured religion, its unwillingness to serve people, its complicity in keeping people ill, and the desire of God that all people be healed, that people treat each other with compassion and justice.

In each account of the healing of the man with the withered hand, for example, the Pharisees are waiting for Jesus to do something "unlawful" on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him, and thus have him arrested and executed. Jesus directly, fearlessly speaks to their malicious plans. First, he notes that they themselves do good deeds on the sabbath, like taking care of one of their animals; he exposes the inconsistencies and selfishness in their rules. Next, he points out that helping another person is far more important than taking care of an animal. He asserts the dignity of every human being and the constant duty to be of service to other human beings. Then, he puts the question to them: "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" When they refuse to answer, he heals the man publicly for all to see, and, according to each synoptic account, the Pharisees immediately plot to "destroy" Jesus. Jesus makes abundantly clear that such issues are a matter of life and death, and he, for one, chooses to side with life. The Pharisees are quick to side with death.

Luke repeats the message with a story about the sabbath healing of a woman who had suffered for eighteen years (13:10-17.) When the Pharisees challenge Jesus, he protests: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" Simply stated, "his adversaries were put to shame." His healing of a woman, and his naming her as a "Daughter of Abraham" were particularly compelling given the sexist structure of the society, where women were considered as subhuman possessions and slaves of men. Luke ups the ante a third time, by placing the account of a healing on the sabbath in the home of a Pharisee, where Jesus heals the man. "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath, or not?" he asks. "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?" Jesus' questions prick the pride of the religious authorities--and in this case, the lawyers as well--who are reduced to silence. Once again, they begin their sinister conspiracy to do away with Jesus.

A fifth episode of civil disobedience addresses the economy of militarism, the business of war which allows the imperialistic forces of Rome to control people. The synoptics address Jesus' confrontation of Roman militarism and its local support in the parable of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. (Mt. 8:28-34; Mk. 5:1-20; Lk. 8: 26-39) Jesus entered the region of the Gerasenes where he met a man who lived among the tombs and was possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus ordered the spirit to come out of the man. "What is your name?" Jesus asked the spirit. "My name is Legion; for we are many," the spirit in the man replied.

To the first readers of the Gospels, the term "Legion" would have signaled an immediate reference to the Roman troops who occupied northern Palestine and kept the people in misery and under control. Since the Gospels would have been considered subversive literature at the time (as they are today in certain places such as Haiti, East Timor or Guatemala), the evangelists, beginning with Mark, use this poetic language to make a political point. Jesus, we read, confronts the forces of Rome, and overcomes them. As is usually the case, the local elite who side with the oppressing empire and profit from its activities, fight to save the imperial forces. When the spirit begged to be allowed to enter a herd of 2000 swine, Jesus gave it permission, and so it rushed down a hillside into the sea, where all the swine were drowned. Immediately, the local people asked Jesus to leave.

The thrust of the parable is simple: the price of healing the poor and thus healing society and the world from the forces of imperial death requires a total change in the status quo. The man possessed by the unclean spirit represents the poor of northern Palestine and elsewhere who were under the oppressive and violent Roman military occupation. The herd would have been worth much money; the price of healing the man--the price of healing society--was extremely high. It meant giving up their prize resource, the number one stock and money maker--the herd. In order to be healed from Roman domination, people would have to let go of the profits of war and oppression; people would have to lose all the worldly benefits they had stolen from the poor so that everyone could be freed from their possession of violence.

The story is told to explain how challenging Jesus was--not only his denunciation of the oppressive regimes and imperial powers, but his call for the economic conversion from profits and oppression to justice and disarmament. Such a call would have been scandalous and radical. The evangelists tell us that Jesus acted this way throughout his life. He confronted the imperial forces which oppressed the poor throughout Galilee and showed people how they could be liberated from oppression. The sad reality of this parable is that the Gerasenes chose not to accept Jesus' way of healing: they asked him to leave and never to return, saying in effect, "We don't want to be healed if it means changing our way of life, losing our business, making less money. We'd rather be possessed and live 'among the tombs.'"

In our own times, such a message would challenge our silent acceptance of the nuclear weapons in our backyards, the profit that we gain from war, and the oppression that such militarism causes to the world's poor. If we are to be liberated from violence, we will have to let go of our profits (much more these days than a herd of pigs), accept the healing--the peace of disarmament--which Jesus brings, and offer our resources to the poor, starving masses of the world. The entire U.S. economy would have to be turned upside-down.

Jesus' message was not well received. The townspeople were filled with fear at his truthful word; the Roman soldiers and local ruling authorities wanted to stop Jesus from teaching his subversive message of revolution. As Jesus made the connections between militarism and economics, as this parable explains, he practiced civil disobedience. The authorities recognized the significance of

his subversive teaching and direct action. They knew that if the masses of poor people in the outlying countryside accepted Jesus' call to nonviolent revolution, the empire would crumble. From their perspective, the only way to prevent such an uprising was to kill Jesus.

Sixth, Jesus also challenged the religious leaders of his day by breaking the legalized eating codes used to manipulate and oppress the Jewish people. According to Mark 7:1-23, Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Mark stresses (in 7:3) the point that for the Pharisees and all Jews, one could not eat without washing one's hands. Such ritual practices were scrupulously upheld and watched by religious authorities. Breaking these cultic observances--which were upheld in the name of God--resulted in condemnation and excommunication. Few dared violate such religious laws. Jesus not only broke those laws, he called people back to the basics of justice and mercy, the original focus of the law.

When Jesus was questioned about his disciples' behavior, (Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:8-13), he responded by questioning the Pharisees' infidelity to God's commandments: "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?... For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites!" Both Mark and Matthew quote Isaiah's critique: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of people." (Isaiah 29:13) "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition," Jesus declares in Mark 7:9. Matthew includes Mark's final explanation of the passage: "There is nothing outside a person which by going into that person can defile that person; but the things which come out of a person are what defile that person." (Mk. 7:15) Such words turned the whole of the Jewish law as it was practiced upside down. They challenged the entire set of customs imposed by the Jewish authorities. Indeed, since these rules and practices needed to be enforced, they enabled the religious authorities--the Pharisees and the Sadducees--to maintain control over the people. Such laws gave them a certain power and prestige, which in turn, led to economic profit. Jesus' words mark a "religious" disobedience. Today, an analogy can be found when women in the Roman Catholic Church celebrate Eucharist, much to the horror and shock of certain hierarchs. In being faithful, these women practice religious disobedience to the religious authorities in the church. They declare their obedience to God and civil disobedience to religious authority.

In chapter 11 of Luke, Jesus publicly rebukes the Pharisees and the lawyers for upholding pious practices while not practicing justice for the poor.

While he was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him; so he went in and sat at table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness. You fools! Did not the One who made the outside make the inside also? But give for alms those things which are within; and behold, everything is clean for you. But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe the mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! for you love the best seat in the synagogue and salutations in the market places!" (Lk. 11: 37-43)

Such strong language manifests the revolutionary mind of Jesus. He broke through all legalistic rituals performed in the name of God so that he could show us how far from God we had come, and how we could return to God. This "good news" of truth threatened those who had long prospered and benefited from misguided religious institutions. Jesus' message was a plea for all of

us to be human with one another, and thus to practice justice and mercy. When we are just, merciful and compassionate, then God is pleased, he insisted. The practice of justice is true religion, Jesus told the high priests and clerical aristocracy. Such a message could only get him in trouble, for it upset the entire foundation of the religious culture of his time. It challenges the religious practice of our own time as well. The whole point of religion is justice and peace, he might say today; and yet, we are still very far from grasping and practicing this central truth.

A seventh type of civil disobedience practiced by Jesus could be called his constant "fraternizing with the enemy." In a time of war, in a time of imperial domination, to associate with any enemy of the ruling authorities would have been illegal. Such behavior would be considered treasonous, as it is in any war, and could result in imprisonment and execution. Peacemaking, however, according to Jesus, requires not only associating with the enemies of one's nation, but loving them. Loving one's enemy during a time of war is dangerous, subversive activity--yet it is the hallmark of Jesus' teaching.

During the height of El Salvador's civil war, for example, it was illegal to associate with and love the enemies of the government, that is, to promote peace by dialoguing with all sides in the war and asking all sides to stop the killing. Those who crossed boundaries to make peace and spoke with representatives of the violent right (the death squads, the government military forces, and the U.S. military advisors) and the violent left (the revolutionary guerillas who killed Salvadoran soldiers), risked their lives. Each side, especially the domineering imperial power, is threatened by the dialogue. Rutilio Grande and Ignacio Ellacuria were two Jesuit priests who associated with the poor and called for an end to injustice and war. Ellacuria in particular dedicated his life to ending the Salvadoran civil war by promoting a dialogue between all sides of the conflict. For his association with the revolutionary leaders (of the FMLN), he and his co-workers were assassinated. His work was so illegal, so civilly disobedient, that they were not even arrested, tried or jailed. Associating with and loving the enemies of one's government is detrimental to one's government because it threatens the profitable business of war and its power of death over others. Thus, the martyred Jesuits and other martyred peacemakers were sentenced to death by some unknown military counsel.

Jesus practiced this same dangerous activity of illegal peacemaking. The Gospels are filled with references to the many times he crossed into "enemy territory" and befriended "the enemy." Jesus associated with Samaritans, Gerasenes, and Greeks, to name a few such "outsiders." The Gospels, for example, take note whenever Jesus speaks with a Samaritan, such as the woman at the well (John 4:4-43), not only because such people were considered ritually unclean, but because they were people from an enemy territory who waged war against the dominant order. The two perilous crossings of the Sea of Galilee in Mark's Gospel (4:35-41; 6:45-53) represent Jesus' reconciliation with "the other side," the enemy territory, in this case, the land of the Gentiles.(5)

From the flipside perspective of the Zealots, who hoped for a violent overthrow of the Roman occupation, Jesus' encounter with the centurion and the healing of his slave, would have likewise caused trouble.(Lk. 7:1-10) The centurion commanded one hundred soldiers in the service of Herod Antipas; he would have been considered "the enemy of the people." Jesus' association with such a person would have infuriated the (violent) revolutionaries of his day. Jesus preached and practiced the love of enemies. His actions enraged the religious and ruling authorities who eventually saw to his execution.

His formal entry into Jerusalem could be considered an example of carefully choreographed street theater (as Myers has suggested), an impromptu, nonviolent demonstration that in effect

undermined the authority of the empire. Though Jesus did not ask his disciples and the crowd around him to pay him homage with palm branches or by singing "Hosanna!", Jesus allows them to do so (Luke 19:39--40). As Myers notes, this procession symbolizes the coming of the humble, nonviolent messiah who will overcome the powers of death and empire in the world through suffering love. Contrary to popular expectations for a warrior messiah, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, the humblest of animals--and a biblical symbol of peace. As theologian Bill Kellermann writes, "Riding a donkey is a preeminently nonviolent posture, an act of humility, and a contemplative reminder of spirit and intent."⁽⁶⁾ The crowds cry out, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." Using scriptural images from Zechariah (9:9; 14:2-4), the evangelists prepare the reader for the nonviolent action at the Temple which follows, where Jesus commits his most daring act of civil disobedience. Yet, since much detail is given to the secret preparations for the procession into Jerusalem, the story must be recognized as making a striking symbolic statement in itself, thus, our eighth example of Jesus' participation in nonviolent civil disobedience. Myers concludes that the procession is nothing less than a satire on the military parades of the empire. In a sense, Jesus is mocking Rome, and demonstrating how a real liberator acts: in humility, nonviolence, and simplicity. But the procession itself is public and political, like Gandhi's salt march to the sea, or Dr. King's march from Selma to Montgomery.

The climax of Jesus' lifelong series of acts of civil disobedience (and our ninth example) is his nonviolent direct action at the Temple, the public center of the Jewish-Roman system. The Temple system worked in conjunction with the Roman empire to keep the people subdued and oppressed. Jewish authorities held that God dwelt only in the Temple; in it, as Myers explains, the whole ideological order was anchored and legitimated.⁽⁷⁾ To be faithful to God, one had to visit God in the Temple and pay a considerable sum to the authorities in the process. Payment of the Temple tax was required. Since Roman coins bore the emperor's image, the emperor claimed to be God, and Jews were not to carry "graven images" of "foreign gods," the Jewish authorities developed their own Temple currency and exchanged Roman coins for their own money, making a significant profit from the exchange. Such a system pleased the Roman occupiers because it kept the religious leaders wealthy and happy, and kept the poor of the countryside preoccupied and at the service of the religious elite.

As Myers explains, for the Gospel writers, "the Temple state and its political economy represented the heart of what was wrong with the dominant system. [The evangelist Mark] had no wish for greater access to, or control over, the cultus--only its demise. In the same breath, [Mark] was at pains to reassure his Palestinian readers that God's existence was not tied to the Temple."⁽⁸⁾ By turning the tables over in the Temple, Jesus symbolically turns over the tables of the whole culture and says, "Enough of this imperial and religious domination. God demands justice towards the poor and peace. That is how we are to worship God. True worship is the practice of faith and justice."

Christians have justified every war, crusade and slaughter down through the centuries in the name of Jesus because they claim Jesus used violence on people in the Temple. But Jesus did not use violence. His whole message and action were staked on his claim of nonviolence. Jesus taught nonviolent love, even the radical, unconditional love of enemies, and at the heart of his teaching was a preference to accept suffering oneself rather than inflict suffering on others as one pursues justice and peace. A careful reading of the text reveals that he hurt and killed no one; rather, he symbolically, dramatically criticized structural violence and demanded that people convert and the imperial system be abolished. The action in the Temple was nothing more--and nothing less--than an act of creative nonviolence. The killings of people in Vietnam, El Salvador, Grenada,

Panama, Iraq or anywhere else can not be justified by Jesus' action in the Temple; Jesus was nonviolently acting for an end to systemic violence and injustice, as the text reveals:

Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the Temple and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the Temple. And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him. (Mk. 11:15-18)

Jesus nonviolently processed into Jerusalem and then maintained a spirit of nonviolence as he entered the Temple. It is reported that he "cased the joint," and returned later the next day or so for his action. In effect, Jesus did a one-person sit-in; when he was not immediately arrested, he left. He made a bold, political statement, what Bill Wylie Kellermann calls, "the most political in all the Bible." (9)

I contend that Jesus' primary political method was dramatic symbolic action. He was, by all accounts, a walking public drama, not in the sense of fabricated or cheap theatrics, but in the manner of visible and acted truth. He offered signs that revealed and pointed and unmasked, actions that seeded the imagination and staked out the presence of the kingdom.... The Temple was truly the economic mainstay of a city whose primary business was religious tourism. Passover was the commercial equivalent of the Christmas rush. At Passover time, Jerusalem's population of thirty thousand could be doubled or even quadrupled. That's a lot of rooms at the inn. As many as eighteen thousand lambs would be slaughtered as sacrifices. We're talking about powerful economic interests. The Temple had received special permission from Rome to collect its own tax. This half-shekel tax may have a modern equivalent in the tax-exemption of the churches, by which their silence and complicity with the state is effectively purchased.... The Temple functioned as a bank; it was not only a source of loans for those with proper credit but also the depository for records of indebtedness. High taxes and runaway interest rates had forced many small farmers into sharecropping and indentured slavery, making the Temple instrumental in an oppressive system. By the time of Jesus, the high priesthood had become so entangled with the Roman occupation that it was all but a political patronage job, appointed by Pilate and subject to purchase and bribe.... Jesus has chosen the public place that is the most visible symbol of complicity between the occupying forces and the religious authorities. The Temple represents the intersection of the Roman money market and the local economy, the spiritual idolatry of status quo power; it is the place of prayer that has been invaded by the clink of Roman coins changing hands. In driving the money changers out, Jesus performs a kind of material exorcism. (10)

"Jesus is not engaged in civil disobedience in the classic sense of breaking an unjust law in order to change," Kellermann concludes. "He had often been taken to task for violating the Mosaic law, particularly around the Sabbath, but here he is not interested in improving the letter of the law, either Roman or Jewish, one jot or tittle. He is simply doing a strong action of visible truth in a place protected by law and authority." (11)

Ched Myers concludes in a similar fashion that Jesus has come to Jerusalem to mount a nonviolent siege on the ruling class. His direct action at the Temple, Myers writes, is "the centerpiece in Mark's unrelenting criticism of the political economy of the Temple. Jesus attacks the Temple institutions because of the way they exploit the poor." Myers notes:

Jesus' first target is the Temple marketplace, which was probably located in the outer Court of the Gentiles. Jesus "drives out" (ekballein) all who bought and sold (10:50). The Jerusalem Temple, as Jeremias has shown, was fundamentally an economic institution, and indeed dominated the city's commercial life.... It is the ruling class interests in control of the commercial enterprises in the Temple market that Jesus is attacking.... Mark considered the money changers suitable symbols of the oppressive financial institutions he so fiercely opposed. "Those selling doves" refers to the staple temple commodity relied upon by the poor.... But Mark is not concerned with advocating lower prices for the poor or fair economic practices.... Jesus calls for an end to the entire cultic system--symbolized by his "overturning" (katestrepsen, which can also mean to "destroy") of the stations used by these two groups. They represented the concrete mechanisms of oppression within a political economy that doubly exploited the poor and unclean... The third and final action implies that the goal of these disruptive steps was a shutting down of Temple operations altogether (10:16). He "forbade anyone to carry any goods" (skeuos, here meaning any vessel or item needed for the cult), "through the Temple."(12)

The scenario as explained by Myers resembles the nonviolent direct action that occurs regularly at the Pentagon and other such military installations. By sitting in at the Pentagon doorway for an hour, one "shuts down" the place. But such actions are only temporary and symbolic, pointing to the day when the place will be closed permanently or transformed into a temple of peace. Jesus' actions reached a climax at the Temple--the symbol of religious and imperial injustice which offended God and hurt the poor. The action in the Temple is specifically disruptive and goes beyond the "classic" civil disobedience of Jesus' earlier episodes to militant, nonviolent direct action.(13) Following the action, he quotes Isaiah and Jeremiah, two prophetic voices who regularly condemned the Temple-state system. Myers concludes that "it is significant that Mark has drawn upon this tradition to defend Jesus' action."(14) The whole Temple episode, then, is the fulfillment of the prophetic tradition's call for justice and peace.

The episodes and teachings which follow the Temple action are a denouement of waiting, watching and explaining Jesus' nonviolence, as he awaits arrest and crucifixion. In these teachings, Jesus continues his nonviolent assault. In a series of parables and statements after the action, Jesus affirms that obedience to God is essential and that such obedience requires a similar faith and resistance. Thus, Jesus encourages his followers not to pay taxes to Caesar, a declaration which was revolutionary and civilly disobedient (our tenth example of his civil disobedience, see Mk.12:13-17; Mt. 22:15-22; Lk 20:20-26). Later, during his trial, Jesus was explicitly charged with inciting people to refuse to pay taxes, an act of revolution punishable by death.(Lk. 23:2)

The question had been initially put to Jesus by the Pharisees and Herodians "in order to catch Jesus" in the act of breaking the law: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"(Mk.12:14) Jesus recognized their hypocrisy, we are told, and asked, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin, and let me look at it." In each of the synoptics, these religious authorities reportedly produced a coin. In doing so, they would have been exposed by Jesus as hypocrites; religious people were not supposed to carry Roman coins because every

Roman coin declared Caesar to be god, an act of blasphemy in the mind of a faithful Jew. Besides revealing their hypocrisy, Jesus declared that God alone was to be obeyed. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's," he announces. If this declaration is consistent with Jesus' other words and actions throughout the Gospels, there can be only one interpretation: everything belongs to God, so everything must be rendered to God. As Dorothy Day explained, once we render to God what is God's, there is nothing left for Caesar. In effect, Jesus told people not to pay taxes to Caesar and then went beyond that to insist that everything one had was to be rendered (meaning handed over, submitted) to God. Jesus did not want anyone obeying the murderous policies of the imperial regime; he wanted people to enter the nonviolent reign of God. Because Jesus had preached, lived and advocated voluntary poverty and radical obedience to God, he and his disciples had nothing to give to Caesar. If such practice caught on with the masses of people throughout Palestine, Caesar would no longer have the obedience of the masses. He would be out of power. When the rulers realized this political truth, coming just after Jesus' action in the Temple, Jesus was arrested and executed. They recognized the political nature of Jesus' divine obedience. Unfortunately, for us, his disciples down through the centuries have rarely practiced this teaching. Christians ultimately are called to live simply and not pay taxes (or specifically, money that contributes to injustice and the mass murder of warfare) to empires or nations. They are citizens of the reign of God, for Jesus was a civilly disobedient tax resister.

After he turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple and told his followers to "Render to God the things that are God's," Jesus was quickly arrested, tried and crucified. Though he had only a matter of hours before he was captured, the Gospels confess his last urgent pleas to his disciples: to keep contemplative watch, to be on guard at all times, to love God and one another, to eat bread and drink wine in his memory, and to put down the sword. He was tried briefly by the Roman and Jewish authorities, accused of "stirring up the people for a revolt, forbidding payment of the tribute to Caesar, and calling himself a king." (Luke 23:2) He suffered the fate of all revolutionaries--brutal torture and execution. He died on a cross between two Zealots.

Jesus remained faithful to God. His execution was a political event, as the trial accounts show. The forces of the empire brought the full brunt of their legalized violence down on Jesus. They used their ultimate weapon against him: he was put to death. Yet, as the scripture recounts, the world had only just begun to see his weapon of nonviolence. God raised Jesus from the dead, and this resurrection was the ultimate act of nonviolent civil disobedience. God disobeyed the imperial code of law which says that the empire has the last say: when someone is executed, according to imperial logic, that person is supposed to stay dead. According to the logic of God--the logic of nonviolence--suffering love and truth-telling always lead to resurrection and life.

On the first day of the week, when Jesus' women friends went to anoint his body, they found the tomb empty. A young man, dressed in white, told them not to be afraid, but to get the others and go to Galilee where they would find him. Jesus had risen and gone back immediately to Galilee, to the outskirts of the empire, into the land of the poor where he had started his nonviolent revolution. He was starting all over again! This time, his disciples would know the outcome: they would speak out publicly against the forces of oppression and injustice, risk arrest and death, and share in the resurrected life of the Christ.

The resurrection inspired the disciples to practice nonviolent civil disobedience as a way of life towards the ruling authorities of the day. Shortly thereafter, the community of followers grew and multiplied and were martyred in large numbers by the imperial regimes. The resurrection gave

them new life and hope and the courage to continue resisting injustice and proclaiming justice for all.

The poetic story of Jesus' life as told in the Gospel of John ends with a resurrection episode of particular boldness. John's Gospel was written long after the others, perhaps seventy years after the death of Jesus. In the first account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples, Thomas was absent. When told that Jesus had appeared and offered them his peace, he laughed it off, saying, "I will never believe it without probing the nail-prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail-marks and my hand into his side." A week later, Thomas was with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you." To Thomas, he said, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe!" "My Lord and My God," Thomas declared as he fell in worship before Christ.

Thomas' response to the risen Jesus became the proclamation of the early church, the community of believers and resisters. "My Lord and My God," were not just pious words uttered to Jesus in a prayer; they were political words of revolution. This creed, as a statement of belief, was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience. A law had been passed declaring that the emperor was to be addressed from then on as "My Lord and My God." Addressing Jesus with this title was not only an act of faith and an expression of love for Jesus, it was illegal. It broke the law. As far as the empire was concerned, it was an act of political "blasphemy" because the emperor was god. The followers of Jesus who used this title, as John's Gospel hints, had taken up the way of nonviolent civil disobedience. They were no longer servants of the emperor; they had finally become followers of Jesus.

Today, we too are called to be a people who address Jesus--not the culture, the domination system, the nuclear bomb, or the president--as our Lord and our God. We are called to be people of the resurrection. As followers of Jesus, we take up where he left off, which means, with the illegal work of nonviolent civil disobedience to unjust laws and warfare.

Notes

1. Merton, Thomas. Gandhi on Nonviolence. (New York: New Directions, 1964), 40.
2. Ahn Byung Mu, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in Kim Yong Bok, (ed.), Minjung Theology. (Singapore: The Commission on Theological Concerns, 1981), 142-143.
3. Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 436-437.
4. Ibid., 161.
5. Ibid., 194-197.
6. Kellermann, Bill. "The Cleansing of the Temple," in Wallis, Jim, (ed.) The Rise of Christian Conscience. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 258.
7. Myers, op. cit., 79.

8. Ibid., 80.

9. Kellermann, op. cit., 256.

10. Ibid., 258-259.

11. Ibid., 259.

12. Myers, op. cit., 299-302.

13. Ibid., 437.

14. Ibid., 303.

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