

Living Securely

Sermon by Neal Blough

on Matthew 5 - 7 and Psalm 37

Church and Peace Conference in Loisy, June 2016

France has recently experienced times of insecurity: the Paris attacks, a not very popular government, military operations abroad, a state of emergency throughout the whole country, social tensions, strikes, and floods. The general mood is tense, eliciting reactions that are not always healthy. This is fertile ground for the extreme right.

But what would it be like if I was living in Syria or Palestine, in East Congo or the Central African Republic? The list could be long. There is an enormous amount of insecurity in our world, politically, economically and socially. And we have to come to terms with the question of insecurity in our own daily lives, in our relationships, at work - unfortunately, also in the Church.

Jesus addresses the question of security in our text, starting with the fundamentals: food, clothing, and daily needs. Besides, this text follows immediately after "you cannot serve God and wealth". Notice that Jesus did not say we don't need those things: "Your heavenly Father knows well that you need all things." The question is one of priority. Most of the conflicts in our world are over questions of security: living space or territory and the desire to accumulate more possessions in order to be "more secure" (money, privileges, power). Jesus's point is clear: we need these things to live. But to really live, especially to live together, we cannot make money, food, clothing, power or privilege our reason for being and living, our "raison d'être".

The essence of our text cannot be summed up by the song "don't worry, be happy." This is not the naïve counsel that says "all will be well." No, the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount describe a way to live in a dysfunctional world. We who ascribe to nonviolence must always remember that nonviolence is necessary, because we live in a world where violence and wickedness are at work, tirelessly creating insecure situations.

And when insecurity comes there is a great temptation to say, "Tough luck for other people, I have to eat, I have to work, I have to protect my reputation, so I will think of myself and my security first." It is the same with our respective countries and nations, and for the groups we belong to. When the world's disorder touches us we get worried, protect ourselves, and forget to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." I'll worry about that once my own needs are met, as soon as I am secure enough I will think about others.

It's true that the life to which Christ calls us makes us vulnerable in a world where insecurity often holds sway.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for

he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matt. 5:38-45, NRSV)

So in unsettling situations, how do we practice non-resistance to evil? In the face of terrorist attacks that kill innocent people who are just having a cup of coffee, can we sit back and do nothing? How do we turn the other cheek in such a situation? How can we "love" our enemy when he is standing there with a Kalashnikov? Can we really trust the words of the psalmist that we just heard a while ago?

⁷ Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. ⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil. ⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. (Psalm 37:7-9)

The lifestyle Jesus himself shows us and that he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount seems to leave us in a totally vulnerable posture. In the Beatitudes he says, "blessed" are those who are meek and merciful, those who work for peace, those who are persecuted for the sake of the justice of God's reign. Only after teaching nonviolence which seems to leave us "disarmed" does Jesus mention security. He says, "Do not worry, get your priorities in order and God will take care of you."

I think I belong to a privileged generation. I grew up in the USA in a safe environment, in an economic setting that was more or less secure. In France, we talk about the "thirty glorious years" following the Second World War, years that allowed the building up of a rather secure social and economic structure: a bit of work, something to eat, security within the country. I never knew what it is like to lack security. Life has been rather easy.

I came across nonviolence during the time of the Vietnam War when I was in high school thanks to some Mennonite friends who spoke of a different path to take in the face of violence. I became a conscientious objector. Janie and I became members of a Mennonite community. We were soon convinced of the theology of nonviolence that we encountered there.

During this time I reacted fairly strongly to certain currents in the American churches - the nationalist theology (God bless America), which asserted that America's superior economy and politics are an expression of her Christian faithfulness and are therefore blessings from God. I discovered the Sermon on the Mount and the radical teachings of Jesus. And I wanted to become a "Sermon-on-the-Mount Christian," that is, a Christian who acts, fighting against war and poverty and fighting for justice and peace. I didn't want to be like these other "pious" Christians, who went to church and prayed, who talked of spiritual things, but at the same time told me to go to Vietnam to fulfil my "Christian duty." At that time I distinguished in my mind between nonviolent Christians who "acted" and "pious" Christians who prayed while supporting violence. So for me, spiritual discipline - no thanks! It was action and commitment that counted.

And then, with the years, I was faced with difficult situations and with people who disappointed me. I saw nonviolent actions or protests that did not succeed in stopping war. I also witnessed conflict and malice among the so-called "nonviolents." And then, I was confronted with my own weaknesses and my faults, my own malicious tendencies. I was disappointed with myself and by my inability to live the Sermon on the Mount.

So I started to re-read Matthew chapters 5 through 7. I, who wanted to be an action Christian rather than a pious one, discovered that the heart of Jesus's teaching - chapter 6 - deals precisely with spirituality and prayer.

I know quite a few people of my generation who, touched by the spirit of May 68 in their youth, wanted to become activists, and wanted to change the world. And then, with time, when they were not able to change the world, they slipped into the world's rationale: a good job with a good salary, a solid, pretty house, and a good education for their children. They said to themselves, "We were naïve. We can't change the world, so let's take care of ourselves first - maybe we always cast a leftist vote."

I also noticed that the world did not always change. Since I couldn't see how to put the non-resistance to evil into practice, I began to doubt nonviolence - it just doesn't seem to work. Little by little I rediscovered spiritual discipline, first of all in a sisters' community that is a member of Church and Peace. I noticed that in Ephesians 6 we find the same verb "to resist."

¹³Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Eph. 6:13)

I don't have time to examine this passage in detail, but it tells us several important things:

- Since there are unstable forces at work in the world, life is a fight
- In this fight, we must not mistake who is the enemy. We are not fighting humans, but "forces of evil" that often enough hold us captive. These forces are manifested in the world structures and in our relationships. We must resist them. The first chapter of the epistle tells us that these forces have already been vanquished by Christ and that we already share in that victory. But life remains a fight.
- We must not mistake our weapons, either. We will not find them at Eurosatory.

¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of **righteousness** in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the **gospel of peace**. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸And **pray** in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Eph. 6:14-18)

Practicing and having spiritual discipline is not a luxury, but a necessity in a world with no security in sight.

To live without fear, in security, we cannot always count on favourable circumstances. To be nonviolent, we cannot always count on the good will of others. From a Christian point of view, nonviolence is first of all a question of faith and spirituality before being a question of ethics. Yes, tactics and strategy are needed. But Martin Luther King made spiritual preparation a priority before he took action.

Our organisation is called "Church and Peace." Let's not forget the "Church" part. The Church is called to be a school of peace, pardon and reconciliation. She is

also the place where we are trained in the spirituality of peace, nonviolence and trust. We may be disappointed with our churches - by *the* Church with her history and failures. But that shows that as Christians we are no better than anyone else. Smooth talk, good, "pacifistly correct" speeches and work on good causes are not enough.

In order to learn to confront our worries and lack of security we have to put down deep spiritual roots and cultivate trust. Then we can combat fear, stop demonising others, and admit that we too are tempted by attitudes and practices that are far removed from the Gospel of Peace. We need places and practices where we can learn to leave worry behind, so that we will not be afraid when our security is threatened. We cannot do this ourselves. For this, we need peace communities. As members of Church and Peace we need to contribute to those communities to make sure they are going in the right direction.

By the way of nonviolence Christ vanquished evil. He invites us to follow the same way and promises us that his Spirit will accompany us, giving us the needed strength to know where true security comes from.

Faced with anxiety and a lack of security, let's encourage our roots to grow deeply in order to produce the fruits of the Spirit.

Translation: Kim Comer

Texts of reference (NRSV)

¹ Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, ² for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. ³ Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. ⁴ Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵ Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. ⁶ He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. ⁷ Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. ⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret-it leads only to evil. ⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. ¹⁰ Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. ¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.
(Psalm 37: 1 - 11)

²⁵ Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father

knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

(Matthew 6: 25 - 34)

¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, [c] take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

(Ephesians 6: 14 - 18)