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Sermon
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Non-Violence and Beloved Community

I took a class at divinity school called *Buddhism, Community, and Diversity: The Color of Practice*. Our professor was an African American woman who had been one of my mentors for several years and continues to call me once a month.

It is beautiful and frightening to be a white person in the minority in a classroom. We did some extraordinary work together that led to some real tenderness, tears and deep sharing. Our first assignment was to write our race autobiographies of when and how we became aware of race in our lives. I cannot describe to you the pain and beauty I witnessed listening to these stories in this class. It is stunning and heart breaking and I want to run and hide a lot of the time. So much of life is about just showing up, don't you find. Just staying present.

A few weeks into the class, everyone attended an all day Buddhist retreat. I have to tell you here that I struggle with Buddhism sometimes. When I practice, I find I can leap too quickly to peace, to surrender, to the solution of mindful release and have noted that this can be a way to spiritually and emotionally bypassing a lot of hard work for me: like processing anger and having difficult conversations with difficult people and risking being rejected and hurt or hurting others. You know, all the scary work of mucking through the tough stuff so that we can grow and allow others around us to grow too. So, I can be resistant to Llamas who come to teach me something and start by telling me that everything I perceive is a choice I make about perception and attachment. So when this Llama started telling us that we tell ourselves stories about who we are and what the world is and how the world thinks about us and we get attached to these stories and then we get attached to our anger about these stories and then we're off, full steam ahead into battle, I raised my hand as I often do and said, okay, I get that but what about oppression and racism and sexism and homophobia and all of it?

Is it all a story we tell ourselves and are we to do nothing about it? Are we not to ever stand up and be counted and say no? Well, this dear llama who had been in training for over 15 years turned to me and addressed me in the most loving way with this really clear focus and I bless him for it because I needed it and I don't know if I would have taken it from anyone but him, or maybe it is better said that I may never been able to hear it from anyone but him.

He told me that he grew up in the south, Georgia, poor and black and the son of a single mom. He told me there was a lot of Clan activity where he grew up. He said his mom and grand mom were personally affected by clan violence. I shut my smart self up then and started listening. He told me that he had dinner with a Clan's member once. And then he told me that he sat and ate with that man and had love in his heart for him. He told us all, look, you don't have to like everyone. It's not necessary or possible. But you do have to love everyone. And I'm not talking about intimate love, he said. I'm talking about transcendent love.

Because if you don't, if you sit with the people you hate or do not like and you let them continue to fill you with hate or disgust or contempt, they win, their agenda, their confused, fearful, broken-selved agenda controls everything, you and all you are trying to free from their control, all the people you are trying to save from their control, they continue to hurt them and your hatred becomes part of all that hurt too. But when you love those people of hatred, you are free and you offer them the possibility of being free too and then all those people you are trying to save from their hatred and oppression, they have a chance too. You have to love others to heal the pain in the world he said. That's how you make a real difference he said.

And here's the thing he said that really, really broke me open. This African-American llama

who grew up poor in the south said to me: You know, that clan's man is suffering a lot more than I am. People who hate, they are suffering tremendously.

I could hardly breathe when he finished. He just smiled at me, full of love. Not triumphant or anything. Just peaceful and easy and full of love.

The llama's response to my question got to the heart of nonviolent communication. I facilitated a nonviolent communication class at First Church in Boston where I was an intern for 2 years. The process of that class change the way I see myself and the world.

One of my nonviolent communication teachers frequently says:

Nonviolent communication is not about feeling comfortable. It is about feeling everything so that love may come.

Nonviolent communication, or what Marshall Rosenberg calls a language of life, in its essence is about taking responsibility for our own unmet universal needs, recognizing that our feelings are triggered by others but that others are not responsible for them, and getting on with the business of creating well-being and life affirming ways of living in the world. We all have unmet needs. They are legion.

The need for love, safety, nurturance, sustenance, and understanding to name only a few. When we come to learn that only we can meet our needs through our healthy interdependence with others and this world, and that when we take responsibility for our feelings and needs and can then meet others where they are, in empathy, that is where love is possible.

Experience of the divine, or holy, or utterly human in me and the divine, or holy or utterly human in you because we are freed up of all that blame and shame that runs around our heads all day long telling us stories about who we have to straighten out for saying such and such and who really likes us and does not like us and who really wants us to be part of their lives in more significant ways but really does not know how to tell us that and all the rest of it. We spend so much of our lives writing stories about other people, putting scripts in their mouths about all their judgments of us. It takes up a good part of the day. Nonviolent communication is a remedy for this at its core. It says, look, value judgments are not where it's at.

You can judge from now until the cows come home and you still do not know anything more than you did before you began about yourself or anyone else. You are just a lot more tired and less fun to be around, for yourself and everyone else.

I read a joke the other day about judgment, also known as sin of course in many Christian circles:

Jesus came upon a small crowd who had surrounded a young woman they believed to be an adulteress. They were preparing to stone her to death.

To calm the situation, Jesus said: "Whoever is without sin among you, let them cast the first stone."

Suddenly, an older woman at the back of the crowd picked up a rock and tossed it into the circle.

Jesus looked over towards the older woman and said: "Do you know, Mother, sometimes you really make me mad."

To take responsibility for feeling something because of who we are and how we are wired and not because someone else is a jerk or insensitive or mean or greedy or selfish or overbearing or....all of it....now that is truly revolutionary and has the power to change the whole world, but I would be satisfied if we could change just a little tiny piece of it...like even this little tiny piece of it right here. And this simple act of naming our needs and feelings is so terrifying because it creates this incredible vulnerability in all of us that takes our breath away. We all want to ask for what we want by making someone else wrong somehow for not figuring out what we want and that we deserve to receive it. To ask for what we want without blaming anyone else for not giving it to us already, now that is really

terrifying.

Like the sneetches in our Dr. Seuss story, we want to point our fingers and say, I feel bad because you are bad, whether we are the ones who wore the stars or the ones who do not. Non violent communication invites us into another conversation that sounds like this: When you do not invite me to eat frankfurters with all your starry friends, I feel sad because I need inclusion.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes, when we understand ourselves better, we understand other people better too.

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Chris Hedges who graduated from Harvard Divinity School and is an American journalist, author and war correspondent specializing in American and Middle Eastern politics and has reported in places where war and hatred have ravaged humanity recently wrote an article entitled, *Acts of Love*. He writes, "The covenant of love recognizes both the fragility and sanctity of all human beings. It recognizes itself in the other. And it alone can save us."

Nonviolent communication teaches us that our feelings belong to us. They are triggered by outside situations, but they are our own. And our needs are our own too, part of our heritage as human beings, shared by all of us. They unite us all. And when we get this, not only can we calm down, we can listen with more ease. We can begin to empathize, to extend understanding and wonder what others are feeling and what unmet needs these feelings are pointing to, knowing that we are not responsible for either but that has human beings on this path of life together, we can walk beside each other, we can hold out a hand, we can be with each other in love, in compassion, in humility.

We don't have to figure out how to win anymore or make up a million stories about why they are wrong anymore or figure out how to get away from them anymore- so we have the energy for kindness, compassion and love. Imagine living in a world in which this was practiced? Imagine living in a family in which this was practiced? Imagine living in a community in which this was practiced?

I look at our first principle: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of All People and I have long wondered what it really means. This friends is what it means. It means seeing each other with this kind of love and empathy and reaching out a hand. Nonviolent communication is a way to be in our first principle with both feet on the ground, hearts open, shoulders back, present with each other in peace.

Chris Hedges wrote in his article, *Acts of Love*, that in one of his classes he took at Harvard Divinity School with Dr. James Luther Adams, Adams said, "We love our enemy when we love his or her ultimate meaning. We may have to struggle against what the enemy stands for, we may not feel a personal affinity or passion for him. Yet we are commanded for this person's sake and for our own and for the sake of the destiny of creation, to love that which should unite us."

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I saw this video clip the other day of a man who is really frustrated and he gets into his car late for work and this kid skate boards past his car as he's pulling out of his driveway and he curses under his breath about this kid doing this every time he pulls out of his driveway and having to slam on his brakes and then he goes to get coffee and there's this long line and these two women in front of him are talking and talking rather than ordering and he is so mad at them and then he gets up to the front, finally, and the person at the counter is so slow and not even looking at him and when he finally does

take his order, he spills his coffee as he gives it to him and just as he is about to pay, fuming now, someone tells him there is a phone call for him at this random pay phone on the wall.

When he gets there, no one is on the line, but when he hangs up, he suddenly sees on every person a blurb or sign on their chests that says what is really happening in their lives, what is really pressing on them.

On the coffee attendant he sees the sentence, My wife just left me. On the two women talking he sees the sentence on one of them, I was just diagnosed with cancer. As he leaves the shop and someone walks into him as he opens the door, he sees, I am afraid my son is using drugs. And as he drives home and pulls into his driveway and the young boy skateboards past again, he sees the words, No one has spoken to me today. I feel so alone.

The llama at that retreat I mentioned told us that everyone is the way they are for a reason and that if we knew their life story, if we really knew and could imagine what it was to be them, we might understand how they had built hate or fear or pain- all those habits and ways of being that we judge as maddening and impossible to be around for long. And then, we might learn that loving them was really the only sane response. It's like Thich Nhat Hahn writes, "Understanding is the power that can liberate us. It is the key that can unlock the door to the prison of suffering. If we do not practice understanding, we do not avail ourselves of the most powerful instrument that can free us and other living beings from suffering. True love is only possible with real understanding."

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I close with the words of Mahatma Ghandi, Nonviolence is not a garment to put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being. If a single person achieves this highest kind of love, it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions. The future depends on what we do in the present.

May peace be upon you all my brothers and sisters.
Amen.