Joshua 24:1-25 (various)

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

Late last month I attended a conference, in Indianapolis, with about 300 other faith leaders from around the country. Different religious traditions were well represented, as well as different skin colors, accents, and cultural identities. The event was sponsored by PICO: a national, non-partisan group working for humane justice through faith-based organizations. Like churches, synagogues, mosques. The name “PICO” stands for People Improving Communities through Organizing and their conference was called the “Prophetic Resistance Summit”

The idea of “resistance” goes ‘way back and has significant biblical warrant. Prophet after prophet challenged and resisted the ruling elite – Moses against Pharaoh; Elijah against Jezebel and her husband, Ahab; Nathan challenged David over his supposed royal prerogative to sleep with Bathsheba, another man’s wife. Jesus supremely challenged the ruling elite. The tactic they all used was dialogue and resistance.

…..so when Jesus said, “Do not resist an evildoer,” he was not advocating passive capitulation to evil (Matthew 5:39). What has been translated *do not resist* is more accurately read *do not resist violently*. The rest of the verse says: “But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Turning the other cheek is actually a form of resistance. Marcus Borg and other theologians have noted that striking the right cheek with the right hand is a back-handed slap, a gesture of superiority. Turning the other cheek rejects the power-dynamic of a social superior who would humiliate a lesser soul. We are not to return evil but neither are we to submit to it. This is biblical; it’s what Jesus taught. It is what he lived.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Key to all of this – this resisting of evil – is understanding who we are. Better yet: it is understanding who we are *not*. We are not alone. We are not isolated, insulated, free-standing entities who have no bearing on others. Our actions, thoughts and motives matter. Just imagine if every thought you had about another could be heard by him or her. Our thoughts matter. What we do matters because we are all connected in a resilient web of life. Knowing this is a spiritual project.

A man who wanted to do great things for God once approached Mother Teresa. He said, “I don’t know what to do for God. Should I start a school; build a charity; go into the foreign mission field, like you?” She said: “What you need to do is make sure that no one in your family goes unloved.” She meant his biological family. She also meant the entire human family. Everyone is connected.

Therefore: You are not safe if others are at risk. Your liberty is intrinsically linked to mine. My freedoms are linked to yours. Living into this reality calls for a higher order of living. It takes maturity. Moral courage. A willingness to share. Our little individual egos will not; cannot carry this load. We must die to self – the selfish, grasping part of us that is me-centered.

We cannot be me-centered and Christ-centered at the same time. Only one will do. Like Joshua says in today’s first reading: It’s up to you. Pick which one you want. It is your choice but for me and my household, I will serve the Lord.

The prophets of our religious past resisted evil in their society. They railed against many of the ills that plague us still: economic injustice; hostility toward outsiders; the unfair disadvantage of not being in the privileged class.

In today’s America we like to think we have addressed those disadvantages through Civil Rights laws, Affirmative Action, voter protections. But unfair disadvantage is imbedded in our society. Consider jails. Black people are five times more likely to be incarcerated than whites even though black people make up only 13 percent of the US population.[[2]](#footnote-2) Police statistics are also revealing. The *Center for Policing Equity* – a research group in New York – says that although police officers use force in less than two percent of all interactions with the public, the use of force is disproportionately high for African-Americans — more than three times greater than for whites.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Make sure no one in your family goes unloved.”

The conference I attended caught the attention of Nativity’s Tuesday morning book group. They are reading *The Myth of Equality* which covers much of what I learned in Indianapolis. For example, the term “white supremacy” does not mean the Ku Klux Klan. It is defined in two ways. What is called “hard” white supremacy is the “intentional building and maintaining of white power by those who do not believe in equality.”

What is called the “soft” version is the benefit that comes to some from racialized systems.[[4]](#footnote-4) As white people we don’t expect a sales clerk to follow us around in a retail store, keeping an eye on us. Brown-skinned and black-skinned people know they don’t have the same level of welcome that we enjoy.

This is not right. We are complicit with injustice unless we resist it. But what does that mean? Very few of us are going to pick up signs and march in protest parades. Very few of us are going to call our members of Congress, although we could! Nevertheless there are many things we can do.

The model of change we learned at the conference was: Awaken, Agitate, and Act. Wake up and recognize the state of the world today. “Wake up” is one of the key concepts of just about every spiritual master, including Jesus. He framed it in terms of being born again. They’re the same thing.

When we wake up; become aware of just how badly many people in the world and in our country are suffering, then we suffer too. Richard Rohr says those who love much, suffer much. I would add that those who suffer with the suffering, love much.

“Make sure no one in your family goes unloved.”

Awaken comes first. Agitate is next. Agitation isn’t violence. When Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus, she did nothing violent. But she did agitate. She broke the law. Was it a crime to sit in the front of the bus? Martin Luther King said that human laws have to align with God’s laws for there to be true justice.

We heard stories about people subject to deportation. We heard about a man named Carlos who is living in a church for sanctuary. Those who are protecting him have a Twitter account. When the deportation officials come, word will go out, and dozens of people will drop what they’re doing and form a “human ball” around Carlos so that he cannot be handcuffed and led away. Breaking the law? Whose law? “Make sure no one in your family goes unloved.”

Awaken. Agitate. And act. Acting also isn’t violent. It can be gentle speech. Thanksgiving is coming up. Multiple generations of family members will sit around the table. Grandma may use a racial slur in front of the youngsters. Not necessarily out of hatred. Just because that’s part of her culture. Don’t let that pass; but don’t dishonor Grandma either. That would be doing violence. Simply but firmly tell the children, “People of Grandma’s generation talked that way long ago. We don’t do that anymore because it hurts other people.”

Don’t fret that people who don’t look like us are also gathering with multiple generations around a dinner table. Don’t fret that they may have hateful speech about us. Some call that reverse discrimination. Don’t worry about that. Alcohols Anonymous has a saying. “Sweep your own side of the street.”

Awaken, agitate and act. That’s a good model for changing the things that are hurting many people in our country. When they suffer, we suffer. Refuse to participate in the cycle of violence. When you do, you refuse to be a helpless victim or a heartless monster. This way, we reaffirm our own humanity, and that of those who would dehumanize us.

“Make sure no one in your family goes unloved.”

1. Lindsey Paris-Lopez, “The Sermon on the Mount: A Theology of Resistance,” Sojourners website, 2-10-2017,

   https://sojo.net/articles/sermon-mount-theology-resistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Janice Williams quoting statistics of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, “White Men Vs. Black Men Prison Statistics 2016,” International Business Times website, www.ibtimes.com/white-men-vs-black-men-prison-statistics-2016-why.., 10/05/16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Timothy Williams, “Study Supports Suspicion That Police Are More Likely to Use Force on Blacks,” The New York Times website, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/study-supports-suspicion..., July 7, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ken Wytsma, *The Myth of Equality,* (IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2017), p.20 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)