

April 8

*'Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.'*

One of the great contributions of the Society of Friends, otherwise known as Quakers, to this history of Christianity, is the seriousness with which they have heard Jesus' call to nonviolence. Against Augustine, the ancient church father who proposed a 'just war' theory for Christians, the founding Quaker George Fox wrote in 1650 that Friends were called to live "in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars."

Simple words for an incredibly complicated problem! How to live in such a way that there is no cause for war? This is a question that should interest all of us, even those who doubt that the elimination of war is a 'realistic' goal. Anyway, Jesus didn't ever claim to be realistic—he told us to strive for the kingdom of heaven.

The think I like about Fox's motto is that it invites us to think creatively and communally about the root causes of war. This is more than the passive nonviolence of one person refusing to carry a weapon into battle—though it certainly includes this kind of witness. This is about a whole community working intentionally and actively to alleviate the conditions that might lead to war. Think it's hard to turn the other cheek when struck? That's just a simple matter of negation: just don't be an avenger. George Fox's proposal is a hundred times harder. It requires us to be builders, reformers, workers in God's vineyard. As the London Yearly Meeting of Friends proclaimed in 1900, "our witness is not narrow and negative but far-reaching in its scope and intensely positive in the active service for Christ's peaceable Kingdom to which it calls us." Best get busy, lest we be found derelict of duty.

-Jonathan Hauze

April 13

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'*

Sometimes, thinking that we are doing things "for righteousness' sake," we get this message very wrong. Recently, on a Facebook page that I follow, someone shared a post which included the screenshot of a bigoted and Islamophobic message that was sent to a Muslim member of the PA House. The post called itself a 'call to action' and included the phone numbers of the offending person's employer, with the message:

"She has to go. Today. She needs to be unemployed and shamed by Friday. Share on your pages. Let's make it happen"

But Jesus did not say, "Blessed are those who persecute for righteousness' sake." I can think of a million reasons why. Suffice it to say that the act of shaming any person is a violation of the righteousness of God, which throughout the Bible is shown to be shaped by mercy, kindness, and love. Add a frenzied mob to the mix, and . . . well, let's just say that this will not lead us anywhere near the kingdom of heaven.

Part of the enduring scandal of the gospel is that God's righteousness is not accomplished by the destruction of those who are opposed to it. After Jesus is crucified by Pilate, he does not return with a message of vengeance against Rome. Instead he empowers his disciples with the Spirit of grace, so that they might go out to all the world to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. The only things that will be destroyed are the old selves of the persecutors whose hearts are converted, and the old ways that set people against one another.

-Jonathan Hauze

April 14

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted
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“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul—who will soon become Paul the Apostle—is traveling to Damascus to look for more disciples to arrest, when Jesus appears before him and asks this simple question.

Saul is dumbfounded. He does not recognize the man before him, though somehow he seems to understand that he is more than a mere man: “Who are you, Lord?”

Jesus identifies himself, but more than that, he again emphasizes his unity with those who are being persecuted: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

For Saul, this unity is a burst of lightning that literally blinds him. He did not really know the people he was persecuting. Persecutors never do. They act out of their own sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness, so puffed up that they cannot even look their victims in the eye. If they did, they would see Jesus staring back at them, a disarming encounter in every sense of the word.

For the disciples of every age who have suffered for the gospel—this is foreign to us, but not to the Christian community in Syria and Iraq—this is not a blast of lightning but a warm and tender flame coming from the hearth. They may feel forsaken and alone, but Jesus is with them—and they with him. The survivors may dwell now in refugee camps, without any kingdom in this world, but Jesus makes his home with them—and in him they have an eternal home.

-Jonathan Hauze

Blessed

Daily Devotions for Lent
2019



Lent 6
April 8-14

*St. Paul's United Church of Christ
Exton, Pennsylvania
www.saintpaulsucc.net*

April 12

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted
for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'*

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1.
Down in the hollow.
Carry him to the safe house.
Red paint on the walls.
2.
Up upon the cross.
Hang our heads and gnash our teeth.
Hear the faint music.
3.
Find our sweet heaven.
Dance and sing and shout and laugh.
We are home and whole.
4.
We are safe and sound.
Laugh and shout and sing and dance.
Breathe our sweet heaven.

-Lauren Alexandro

April 9

*'Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.'*

Recently I attended an ordination service for a young man who is called to be a UCC chaplain in the U.S. Army. The sermon was given by Bill Worley, our Conference Minister, who talked about the unique challenges of being a military chaplain. Bill knows, because he was a Marine Corps chaplain in Iraq.

Bill said something that stuck with me. Every Marine, he said, knows that the mission of the rifle squad is to “locate, close with and destroy the enemy.” But a chaplain, as a representative of Christ, has another mission, to “locate, close with and love your enemy.” You can’t reconcile the two, but somehow a chaplain must find a way to stand in the midst of that tension and conflict and bring the presence of Christ into those deeply fractured human places.

Ever since, I have tried to remember all the military chaplains in my prayers, that they may be strengthened in the bearing of this burden. But I’ve also thought a great deal about what it might mean for all of us to “locate, close with, and love our enemies.” It certainly takes away the abstraction of our self-reflection, where we imagine that we don’t have enemies just because we aren’t in the Marine Corps. What if, in teaching us to love our enemies, Jesus wanted us to assume that we all have them? That we can’t wiggle out of it just by saying, “He’s not my enemy; I just don’t like him.” Admit it. There’s somebody you like to blame. Or somebody who ‘makes’ you regress. Or somebody you think is ‘the problem.’ Know that, and then love them. It’s our mission.

-Jonathan Hauze

April 10

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted
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Back in my college days, the student body had some wonderful cheers to encourage the football team. Such as:

Fight, fight for the Inner Light;
Kill, Little Quakers, Kill!

The irony being, of course, that Swarthmore College is a Quaker school and therefore peace-loving by nature. It's really no wonder that we had such a terrible football team. No killer instinct to speak of. And the sarcastic chants probably didn't help.

I always thought there was historical elegance in the fact that our Quaker school had a football team that habitually took such a beating. Because this is exactly what happened to the first Friends who stood firm in their conviction that war was incompatible with the Spirit of God. They refused to take up arms or support war in any way, and as a result they were imprisoned and beaten. Sometimes their property was seized. Sometimes they were killed. Perhaps this is why the beatitude about persecution follows immediately after the beatitude about peacemaking. The two are closely related.

Why are the prophets of peace met with such violence? It's a long story, and an old one. It still happens today. The good news is that the last word comes not from the frenzied crowd chanting "Crucify him!" but from the cross where God's love speaks life, love, and mercy. There is no fight song for the kingdom of heaven. It can only be gained by losing.

-Jonathan Hauze

April 11

*'Blessed are those who are persecuted
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"Now you know the worst / we humans have to know / about ourselves, and I am sorry". So begins the poem that Wendell Berry wrote for his granddaughters after they visited the Holocaust Museum.

It is a terrible burden, this knowledge. We wish that we could spare our children this learning, but it is a part of growing. They will come to know that there is evil in the world. They will see with their own eyes—we pray only in museums and on pixelated screens—that while made for goodness human beings are capable of great cruelty. They will find, as we have, that "there is no answer / but loving one another".

There are no other answers. But there is hope. If we are courageous, hope will find us, because by grace the cruelty of man will not bear what evil intends:

When a man of peace is killed
by a man of war, he gives a light.

You do not have to walk in darkness.
If you will have the courage for love,
you may walk in light. It will be

the light of those who have suffered
for peace. It will be
your light.

If we are courageous, their light will be ours. It will show us the way.

-Jonathan Hauze