



Sermon for Palm Sunday, 2016: St. Anne's Steveston

Sometime around 1920, a young boy named Bill Stafford came home from school and told his mother that two new students had been surrounded on the playground and taunted by their classmates because they were black.

“And what did you do, Billy?” asked his mother. “I went and stood by them,” Billy said.

Years later during World War II, Stafford became a Conscientious Objector. With other Conscientious Objectors, he would be sent to public service camps in California and in Arkansas while other men and women served in the military in Europe or in the Pacific.

Once when a group of Conscientious Objectors was visiting in a local town on a Sunday, they came very close to being mobbed and lynched. Stafford describes this experience in his book entitled *Down in My Heart*.

“It takes such an intricate succession of misfortunes and blunders to get mobbed by your own countrymen—and such a close balancing of good fortune to survive—that I consider myself a rarity...in being able to tell the story...but just how we began to be mobbed and just where the blunders and the misfortunes began, it is hard to say.”

Today we hear in excruciating detail the intricate succession of events, misfortunes and blunders that led to Jesus going from his exciting entry into Jerusalem to being mobbed by his own people and by their rulers, the Romans. But unlike Bill Stafford and his companions, Jesus does not have what Stafford called the “good fortune” to survive. Jesus does not live to tell the tale as Stafford did.

And so we get to hear this morning is *Luke's* account of what happened to Jesus. But in many ways the tales—Stafford's tale and Luke's tale of Jesus—have much in common, for in both, those who stand for peace, those who are about non-violence—elicit violence from others. Or as a Quaker once said in describing his denomination: "(Quakers) work for peace -- and if you really want to cause conflict, work for peace."

If you were listening carefully in the parish hall to Luke's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, you heard that after Jesus mounted his colt, his disciples cried out "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” But the mention of peace does not stop here. We are told that Jesus stops, looks down at the city and, weeping, says to Jerusalem “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

This emphasis on peace occurs throughout Luke, with the word for peace occurring fourteen times in Luke, more than all the other gospels combined. It’s a theme that begins with John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah's song celebrating the prophet who comes: “to guide our feet into the way of peace. (1:79). It continues with the angels’ song at the birth of Jesus: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (2:14). And it shows up in Simeon's song as he holds the Messiah in his arms: “Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised” (2:29) “For Luke (then) salvation consists partly in living at peace with God and with each other -- Jews with Gentiles, men with women, rich with poor, slaves with free.”

But as we know, living in peace, refusing to resort to aggression of any kind—can be a difficult stance to take. For our bodies are wired to do differently—to kick into what’s called the “fight or flight” response when we are in conflict or when we experience too much stress. This reaction, a kind of genetic wisdom designed to protect us from bodily harm, involves a chemical release that prepares our body for running or fighting. And so in conflict our bodies want to get aggressive or to get away.

But our bodies are not the only things telling us to fight or to flee. Our minds have tremendous power here too. Our positions and beliefs on issues, our expectations of the way others should behave, our expectations about what we and others are entitled to, our convictions about what is a legitimate response in a situation of conflict—all these deeply influence the aggressive acts we are willing to take with one another or the rationale we use for disappearing when conflict arises.

This morning Jesus’ way is another way. It’s the way of Gandhi. It’s the way of Martin Luther King and it’s the way of writer and pacifist William Stafford. It’s a way that resists acting on the impulse to fight or to flee.

And so Jesus *does not flee* but goes to Jerusalem knowing it will be a place of conflict that will lead to his death; Jesus *does not tolerate violence toward others*, interceding when one of the disciples cuts off the ear of the slave of a high priest, saying “No more of this” and healing the wound; and Jesus, even when violence is directed at him, *is all about reconciliation*, saying “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” as he is crucified.

And so it’s easy to see how the actions of Stafford, and Ghandi and Martin Luther King are connected to Luke’s Jesus is and what he does in our Palm Sunday and passion accounts for today. It’s easy to see Jesus in the actions of Bill Stafford, the boy who would become a famous poet and write as he stood with the two black children who were being taunted on the playground. It’s easy to Jesus in the actions of the man Ghandi in traditional Indian dress declaring: “There are many causes I am prepared to die for but no causes I am willing to kill for.” It’s easy to see the actions of Jesus in the African American Baptist minister Martin Luther King writing his first book describing six principles of non-violence:

“Nonviolence is not passive,” he wrote “but requires courage.” “Nonviolence seeks reconciliation,” he wrote, “not defeat of an adversary.”

But what is more important is that we see ourselves as connected to who Luke’s Jesus and what he does, especially in those moments when all the chemical responses in us tell us to fight or to run or when our minds tell us it’s legitimate either to get aggressive or to disappear from a difficult conversation. It’s important that we neither fight nor flee but take one deep breath and choose to lower our voice but not to avert our eyes, choose to stand our ground without running over someone else.

Stafford put it this way as he described his family and how it formed him into the pacifist he would be all his life: “...our family” he said “... (reinforced) an attitude (of redemption when it came to) danger or...aggression or even...evil...You don’t overwhelm the opposition, you don’t wipe them out; you redeem them, you save them. They can count on you. You don’t always count on them, but you always try to get into the attitude that you’re ready to count on them, but you’re always ready, if necessary, to oppose them, but to oppose them in the way Martin Luther King did, the way that Gandhi did....this is a religious position. It’s a Quaker, Mennonite, Brethren, Buddha position. And in a way.....a kind of feminine position.”

And, of course, this morning what we would say is that this is fundamentally a “Jesus position.”

Today, Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion, is all about the one who comes to bring peace. But Palm Sunday is only the beginning of Holy Week. We will yet traverse paths that will lead to the temptation to fight or to flee in the week to come, and we will see the cost of refusing either to fight or to flee.

But at the beginning of the new week, as we light the new fire in the dark of our Easter Vigil, we will see something else. Though the cost is high—the cost of restraining ourselves, the cost of not running away from conflict, the cost of the loss of life, itself, new light and life will come to us; new light and life will be given to the world.

Works Cited or Consulted

Kim Stafford’s book *Every War Has Two Losers* in which he collects his father, William Stafford’s, writings about pacifism. One of Stafford’s “aphorisms”: “To hold the voice down and the eyes up when facing someone who antagonizes you is a slight weight—once. But in a lifetime it adds up to tons.”

Bryan Stoffregen’s exegetical comments on the Lukan Triumphal Entry story and on Luke’s Passion account can be found at his website *Crossmarks*. He references Tom Mullen’s comments about Quakers in *Laughing Out Loud and Other Religious Experiences*.

Information about fight of flight response is at <http://www.thebodysoulconnection.com/EducationCenter/fight.htm>

Information about Martin Luther King's six principles of non-violence found in his first book *Stride Toward Freedom* can be found at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/glossary.html> . These are: (1.) Nonviolence is not passive, but requires courage; (2.) Nonviolence seeks reconciliation, not defeat of an adversary; (3.) Nonviolent action is directed at eliminating evil, not destroying an evil-doer; (4.) A willingness to accept suffering for the cause, if necessary, but never to inflict it; (5.) A rejection of hatred, animosity or violence of the spirit, as well as refusal to commit physical violence; and (6.) Faith that justice will prevail.