

## THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

JEREMIAH 15:15-21 | PSALM 26:1-8 | ROMANS 12:9-21 | MATTHEW  
16:21-28

When I do premarital counseling with couples before their wedding, I often ask them to read this book. It's by a psychologist named Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, and it's called *Non-Violent Communication*.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, couples get intimidated by a book with “violence” in the title, and I have to tell them that it's really a book about having healthier conflicts and communicating better, and it will make sense if they read the introduction. Because about three pages in, he says what he means by violence. He says violence stems from “a kind of thinking that attributes the cause of conflict to wrongness in one's adversaries, and a corresponding inability to think of oneself or others in terms of vulnerability.” In other words, an assumption that my pain is caused by other people. And a belief that the way to alleviate my pain is to cause those people pain in return.

One of the things I like about that definition is that it connects seemingly disparate types of conflict in our society. On the one hand, it includes heinously violent acts like the shootings in Jacksonville and Chapel Hill this past week. These acts of violence are all different, but they often originate from a belief that our suffering is caused by others, and that the way to heal ourselves is by causing more suffering for others. You can think of intimate partner violence and international conflict in similar ways.

But that definition also includes types of conflict that we don't normally think of as violent. Many of us have had conflicts in our relationships where it seems like people are more interested in winning an argument or humiliating the other person than in finding a solution to their disagreement. Sometimes we might even hope that other people continue to behave poorly just so we have an excuse to get back at them. Violence here isn't just about how we act, but it's about what motivates our actions.

That self-defeating pattern is exactly what St. Paul writes about in today's reading from Romans. Today's reading has a bunch of different admonitions in it, so we're just going to focus on one. St. Paul writes, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

It's helpful to start here with the image of repayment. What does it mean to repay? To give something back. We have been on the receiving end of some action. And now we are going to do something in return.

I try to avoid sports metaphors in homilies—I think this is the first one of the year—but if you ever watch a baseball game and someone gets hit by a pitch, what often happens when the other team comes up to bat? Now one of their players gets hit. We call that the “payback pitch.” You hit one of our players—even if it was just by mistake—and we hit one of yours. Where this gets more interesting is after the game when a reporter will ask the

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (PuddleDancer Press, 2003).

pitcher why he chose to throw a payback pitch. And the pitcher will usually say, “Well, I didn’t have a choice.”

Those interviews are sort of funny because they reveal a habit that many of us fall into. Maybe you’ve seen someone make an inexplicably self-defeating choice or do something out of line with their values and asked them, “Why would you do that?” The response is usually, “Well, I didn’t have a choice.”

There are two big problems with that kind of thinking. First, it’s almost never true. We almost always have other choices. And second, this is the one St. Paul is concerned with, when we simply react to others—when we engage in that in kind repayment—we are taking away our own agency and investing others with a huge amount of power. We are giving ourselves over to others and saying that they have the ability to determine how we act. And once we give other people that power, it’s really hard to break out of that pattern of conflict. Because our actions are always contingent on what other people do.

And that kind of reactive posture creates a spiritual problem, too. If I repay evil for evil, I don’t just let others dictate my actions. But I let them determine the kind of person I am. I let them decide what my values are and what my priorities are. I may think that I’m getting back at this other person, but I’m also dragging myself down in the process. If you read nonviolent theory in people like Gandhi, Rustin, and MLK, sometimes they refer to this as “nonviolence of spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Which isn’t just about actions but about ideals. If you hate people because they hate you or resent people because they resent you, you might hurt your enemy a little bit, but you’ll destroy your own heart in the process. You’ll harm yourself in ways they never could.<sup>3</sup>

St. Paul offers an alternative pattern of life. And he does it by dropping in a little phrase. “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” *So far as it depends on you*. So often in church, we’re told to think about others. And rightfully so. But here Paul flips it and says that sometimes, especially in situations of conflict, we actually have to begin by thinking about ourselves. Who are we? Well, we believe that we are loved and cherished children of God. And that, through our baptisms, we have been given Jesus’s mission of redeeming and reconciling creation. So as we live and love and serve, we are not just reacting to the actions and agendas and priorities of others. But we are responding to the love of God in Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> The Six Principles of Nonviolence are summarized here: “The King Philosophy - Nonviolence365®,” The King Center, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>; Also a good explanation of this from “Opinion | Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Brandon Terry,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/opinion/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-brandon-terry.html>. “There’s a way in which, if we’re reflexive about where that desire [to humiliate others] comes from, we will find that it comes from a place that’s irrational, indefensible and, likely, cruel, and that if we were to imagine a way of life built around those feelings, those desires, those practices, it would be one that would make it really hard for us to have healthy social ties, stable institutions, flourishing social relationships.”

<sup>3</sup> Here’s Howard Thurman on that from *Meditations of the Heart*. “There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the ‘angel with the flaming sword.’ Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes ‘the angel with the flaming sword’ to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of ‘the fluid area of your consent.’ This is your crucial link with the Eternal.”

That changes how we think of ourselves. Our identity is not given to us by others. It's entrusted to us by God. So instead of asking, *What kind of person are they?* Or *What did they just do?* We can ask, *What are the values of Christ that orient our lives?* In your personal life, that might be honesty, kindness, and forgiveness. In our congregational life, it might be faithfulness, inclusion, and respect. No matter what other people are doing, we can always embody those values in our life and practice.<sup>4</sup>

And it changes how we act, too. At the very end of this reading, Paul quotes from the book of Proverbs about feeding your enemies when they're hungry and giving them a drink when they're thirsty. That's the same point. That instead of acting toward others the way they act toward us, we have the ability to act toward others the way that Christ acts toward us. We can break out of those patterns of conflict and violence and hatred that pull us apart.

The nonviolence that Paul talks about here isn't just about the absence of something. But it's about the presence of a new way of life: the way of the cross. A way out of cycles of violence. A way that overcomes evil with good. A way that we walk together as the body of Christ.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>4</sup> Those of you who have served on council with me know that we have our mission, vision, and welcome statements at the top of my reports. That's a way of reminding us what our purpose and values are. Even if there's a lot we can't control, we can always seek to live in alignment with our core values. Same thing as the synod's core values that Rev. Freiberg talked about when she was here at the end of July.