

# **Resist Not Evil?**

## **January 25, 2015**

### **Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini**

**Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

**We are here,**  
*at the end of a mostly grey mid-winter week,*  
**to celebrate life and the power of love,**  
*in freely chosen community,*  
**rooted in an old progressive and living tradition**  
*which resists dividing up the whole world*  
**into them and us.**

**And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.**

**Singing: 123 Spirit of Life**

#### **Ingathering**

Once there was a little town in India where people of many different religions lived together, which is true of many cities and towns in India. But some of the members of each of these religions in this little town in India were not always kind to each other. Sometimes the older folks in one religious group would say to their children, "You can never trust a Muslim. They always do bad things." Other older folks would say to their children, "How can anyone be a Hindu, with all of those statues they worship with so many arms and legs? It's very silly." Others said, "Beware of the Christians, because they bow only to a book of fairy tales written long ago." And so on and so on.

The children listened to their elders, and started to say the same things. Sometimes at school, they were mean to each other. They would call each other names and say terrible things to each other about their families and their religious words and ways.

Now Abdul was a Muslim boy who went to school with Hrithar, a Hindu boy. Both were about ten years old. Both had been taught to not like each other because one was Muslim and one was Hindu. The two of them were always fighting, and calling each other names. Finally one day, during the lunch break, they got so mean to each other that their teacher came out to the schoolyard and separated them.

"This school, and our town, will be a terrible place to be if this keeps on happening. This afternoon, as you know, we are all going to be working in the gardens for our science class. We

are going dig holes and plant trees and vegetables. And you two are going to work together." And with this, the teacher took a long piece of cloth out of his pocket, bent down, told the two boys to get close to each other, and he tied Abdul's right leg to Hrithar's left leg. They protested "I don't want to be next to this fool all afternoon. It's not fair." The teacher just shrugged, and said, "Get to work now."

And so, for the rest of the day, the two were tied together. They had to learn to work in a different way. When Abdul told Hrithvar it was time for him to pray, Hrithvar had no choice but to face in the direction Abdul faced and bow to the ground for a moment. Hrithvar was intrigued by the language Abdul used in his prayer. It was Arabic, and it was very different from Gujarat, the language they usually spoke together. Hrithvar tried to make some of the sounds in his throat after he heard them. Abdul laughed and said, "No, not like that, like this! Say Sabr, not Sa-bear – it means to have patience."

Hrithvar tried, and finally succeeded in saying the word right. Then Abdul asked Hrithvar what a Hindu temple was like inside – he had been forbidden to ever go inside one. Hrithvar told him about the beautiful colors and the many candles and flowers. The two boys learned to work together with strength, even though their legs were tied together. They planted more trees than anyone else in the class. And by the end of the day, Abdul and Hrithar had become friends. And they remained friends for the rest of their lives.

**Greeting** Announcements and Caring Cards etc.

### **Conversation from the Heart**

Good Morning. My name is Judy Kleen and I have been a member of this church since 1984. I am here today because this church holds a special place in my life. Here I have shared my story, found friendships and chosen family, found comfort and guidance through the difficult times in my life, found inspiration and challenge to consider life's important questions. Here I am encouraged to become the best person that I can be, and make the world a better place. Over the years I have been involved in many aspects of the church. You will see me in the Chalice Choir on Sunday mornings, sharing the joy and the impact that music can have in our lives. I am proud to have been part of the search committee that invited Rev. Mark to spend the last 18 years with us, inspiring and touching my life, all of your lives, and the greater Columbus community.

This morning I am here as your treasurer. It is an honor to serve in this capacity, to feel your confidence in my ability to monitor, preserve and protect the financial assets and activities of our church.

We fund the operation and good works of this church with our operating pledges. Your pledge payments keep our church community alive and well. They allow us to recruit and retain wonderful ministers who inspire us on Sunday mornings with meaningful sermons; to continue to make glorious music in our four choirs; to plan and implement our Coming of Age program that generates amazing Faith Statements from our youth. Your pledge payments make our Justice Action Ministry a reality rather than a dream. As Treasurer, I sign the checks every week to pay for all of these programs and our lovely building. I make sure that there are sufficient funds in the bank to cover payroll checks for our ministers and staff. I would like to say thank

you to the 350 members and friends who are up-to-date on your Operating Pledges. But we still have about 100 pledging members and friends who have paid nothing, or substantially less than half of their annual operating pledges, as of the end of December, which is halfway through our fiscal year. Bringing your pledge payment up-to-date will allow us to make up the \$33,000 that we are currently short, compared to December a year ago.

I know that some of you may feel that discussing money is not appropriate. It may make you uncomfortable. My feeling is that it is a concrete expression of my UU values.

The Board looks to me to present and interpret our financial position on a monthly basis. I feel responsible to solve our financial problems. But I cannot do this alone. If we were a church that used guilt or future reward to motivate our members, I could tell you that paying your pledge on a regular basis would earn you your ticket to heaven. But we are not that church. I can tell you that paying your pledge will help me sleep at night. We do not have a large Rainy Day Fund, or a church member who can just dash off a check for \$30,000. We really do depend on your timely payments.

I know that we are all balancing many financial commitments: car repairs, college tuition, property taxes, medical bills. In a church as large as ours it is easy to assume that the person sitting next to us has brought in the snacks, weeded the garden, or paid ahead on their pledge so it will not matter that we are a bit behind. But it does matter. When you make your individual pledge payments, I can pay our collective bills.

This church brings love, support and challenge into our lives as we strive to make the world a better place, to make our individual lives deeper and more meaningful. Thank you for moving your church commitment up the priority list. Thank you for investing with me in this very special community.

**Affirming: It is respect for self which makes resistance conceivable.**

*Catherine MacKinnon 1978*

**Singing                      #304 A Fierce Unrest**

**Communing:**    You sun, you grey clouds, you cold air, you are outside my skin, but you are related to me, and I would not be me inside without you outside.

You age-upon-age-upon-age of human history; you dervishes dancing in Konya, Turkey; you men and boys, who worked the soft-coal mines in Cherry, Illinois; you Mayan washerwoman of Antigua, Guatemala; you crafters of shoji screens in Kyoto, Japan; you wandering teachers in the Galilean villages millennia ago; you sailors guiding ships to Alexandria, Egypt in the days of Ptolemy; you aging gardeners in the Sun Yat Sen gardens of Vancouver, Canada; you boys galloping on horses across the steppes of Mongolia; you women and men with signs announcing your financial need at freeway exits in Columbus, Ohio; you university students in Lahore Pakistan reading the thoughtful writings of Mohammed Iqbal; you astronomers in the high mountains of Chile cataloguing the stars; you sculptors in Ravenna, Italy, who restored a church-building a thousand years old some 500 years ago; you grandparents in Tenochtitlan who, at the

same time the repair work was being done in Ravenna, taught your grandchildren how to create chocolate out of the large yellow pods; you Beacon Press editors daring to publish the Pentagon Papers in the 1970s when no one else would; you rabbis praying with your feet at Selma in the days of Dr. King; you choirs singing anthems in languages you do not even speak – I cannot be me unless you have been, unless you are, and unless you will be – you. We are all related. No one is left out. Everyone makes the whole.

You words and images that fly from my heart, from my experience, from my mouth, you too remind me of who I am, almost as much as this silence does.

### *The great silence*

You whom I love, you with whom I struggle, you whom I remember with gratitude, you who draw forth my tears, I am not me without you woven into my life, for good or for ill. I remember my own face now by remembering you, by naming you, in my heart, or aloud in the safe space of this room.

### *The Naming*

You, singing, who affect many of us in a way no one yet fully understands, come and help me to be me – I in the sound if I can hear, in the sight if I can see, in the spirit if I can breathe.

### *(anthems)*

**The First Reading** is from bell hooks' book *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, written in 1988. One of the great times I have had in recent years, which I was able to share with other staff members, was spending a few full days with bell hooks at OSU. Freeform conversations with no more than 30 people in the room over several days. It was a great gift to my life.

“It is necessary to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized). It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist – the potential victim within that we must rescue – otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation.”

**The Second Reading** is the text of a song by Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy, a Nicaraguan songwriter.

*Obviously, the song does not have rhyme or meter in the English translation. The words by the poet are based on the words of Tomás Borge, a Sandinista fighter, whose wife was abused, tortured and killed by the dictatorial government of the Somoza family, which, sadly, our own government supported. You need to know at least that part of the story in order for the lines of this song to have their full impact.*

Revenge

My personal revenge will be your children's  
right to schooling and to flowers.  
My personal revenge will be this song  
bursting for you with no more fears.

My personal revenge will be to make you see  
the goodness in my people's eyes,  
implacable in combat always  
generous and firm in victory.

My personal revenge will be to greet you  
'Good morning!' in streets with no beggars,  
when instead of locking you inside  
they say, 'Don't look so sad.'  
When you, the torturer,  
daren't lift your head.  
My personal revenge will be to give you  
these hands you once ill-treated  
with all their tenderness intact.

### **Preaching**

I don't know about you, but lately, when I wake up in the morning, I don't want to see the News. I just want to put a paper bag over my head, and pretend there is no News. You know, missiles fired into Ukrainian cities, Bonnie and Clyde-like sprees of multi-state, barely teen-aged mayhem, cells of people planning destruction in quaint Belgium...it gets to be a bit overwhelming for me at times.

But if I want to run away from the News sometimes, I find that the Olds are not much better. This week I came across a story that somehow I missed when it happened last May in Wisconsin. Two 12-year-old girls stabbed a 12-year-old class mate of theirs *19 times*. Why? They were trying to curry favor with an *imaginary* internet creep called Slenderman by killing a classmate. The girl who was attacked somehow survived, and, incredibly to me, is already back at school. The two girls who assaulted her, now 13 years old, admitted to premeditating the murder attempt, and both soon will be tried. They face sentences of 65 years in prison. At age 13.

I tell you this sad, sad story, because I really want you to understand that I don't think that I am naive about the realities of life in our day in age. And life in most *every* day and age, when I read history. Jesus was one of a hundred thousand crucified by the Romans. Our religious ancestor Miguel Serveto was one of 58 people burned by the Protestant leader John Calvin in Geneva. Beheading for political and quite immoral reasons was the work of the powerful for a thousand years before these horror stories we are hearing now from the Middle East. Whether we are talking the rotten King Henry VIII of England, or a Chinese emperor in Beijing, a Japanese Samurai, a European Crusader or a Spanish Inquisitor, the gut wrenching monstrosities of the present age are hardly new.

And remember that even the violence of 12-year-olds is not really new. There was a 12-year-old boy named Stephan of Cloyes in France, in the year 1212, who tried to lead a crusade to the Holy

Land to take Jerusalem away from the Muslims. He said he had a letter from Jesus himself, which gave him authority to lead such a crusade. He only got as far as Marseilles, having left from Paris, and the children who accompanied him went home, exhausted by the hardship. Some of them got sick and died.

Now just yesterday I was talking with a person here at the church about my experience of working with emotionally disturbed children for a number of years. It was at Hawthorn Center, a place for residential treatment. The conversation actually sparked some memories useful for my sermon this morning.

You see, some of the kids I used to work with also had conversations with imaginary beings, like early 70's version of Slenderman, or a hand-written letter from Jesus prompting a violent crusade. At Hawthorn, I actually experienced violence from some of the children, and especially the teens, who I assure you were not tiny, but large and strong. The ones that got to me the most, however, were the 10-, 11-, and 12-year-olds diagnosed as sociopathic, or psychopathic. They seemed to have no capacity to feel remorse if they actually *followed through* with some violence against you. Some indeed tried, although I was never stabbed myself, like that unfortunate girl. I do remember one punch to the gut however. But I was just a "thing" to them, not a person. It was creepy to me. This reality is something I have struggled with in my inner life to this very day.

I talked with a psychiatrist friend at Hawthorn Center about my struggle. I said to him, "It actually feels to me like some of these children are, well, er, um, *evil*. It's so disturbing to me. How can a 12-year-old be without a conscience? How can a 12-year-old be evil?" He answered, "Oh, it *is* very disturbing. I agree. And it's disturbing for several reasons. One of them, sadly, is that even those of us who are relatively healthy, and not in any way sociopathic, can *also* sometimes act without much remorse. We can block ourselves off from feeling things toward others because it hurts to do so. So when we meet someone who is like that much of the time, most of us do indeed want to use unequivocal words like *evil*, something far worse than what any of us think we do. And yet, even someone who is that ill is still a human being. None of them ever one day just woke up and decided to be the devil instead. We just don't know much about such things...yet."

I was struck by his words, like when I struck the temple gong earlier. They vibrated through my soul for a long time. The reading I offered you this morning from the great bell hooks says pretty much the same thing as my psychiatrist friend. I think it's worth reading again in full, since its so brief. "It is necessary to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized). It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor *within* that we must resist – the potential victim *within* that we must rescue – otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation."

Wow. She is asking us to understand that *we ourselves* oppress others sometimes. Oh, please, I'm not saying that one of us is the new Grand Inquisitor, or head-honcho slave-trader either. But we each *are* human, and sometimes, most of us do things which are not for our own good, or for the good of others. Why? Because we panic, maybe? Because we want to separate ourselves



from being tarred with someone else's brush? Because our own wounds are too deep? Maybe these and more.

But, to unpack what bell hooks says, I want to go to the sermon *title* this morning. It comes from the beloved, but totally distorted King James Version of the Book of Matthew. The phrase is "Resist not evil" or ἀνθίστημι τῷ πονηρῷ (anthistemi to ponéros) is the Greek. The King James Version has been used to support all sorts of theories of passivity, probably because the translators weren't anxious in the days of King James to offer the real translation, which might have had political ramifications, i.e. get rid of the stupid king. The Greek does not preach passive *anything*. It translates *Don't set yourself over and against (anhistemi) those who (to) trouble you with their annoying, or even evil ways (poneros...which does mean evil, but which also means troubling, annoying, disturbing and even dangerous just as much)*. But I think this better translation is exactly what my psychiatrist friend said to me. This is what bell hooks says to me. Do not think *you* are in the world of the pure and perfect, and the horrible person is on a different planet, and has no more relationship to you than a slimy slug.

Now look. I know this is a hard teaching to get. I admit that. Like I said, I have struggled with this notion for a long time, and I am 65 years old. I do think, however, that struggling with this concept is a good idea, no matter what age we are. Even if you finally decide to push it away from yourself, and say  
No way.

Now, *after* the Galilean says, *Don't set yourself over and against those who trouble you with their annoying and even evil ways*, he then offers three bits of advice as to how to deal with the Roman military and cultural occupation of the land. The peer reviewed scholars I trust the most are clear that these words are at the very center of the Galilean's teaching. The great Walter Wink (according to theologian Obery Hendricks), summarizes these three bits of advice like this: when you *do* encounter an annoying, or even evil behavior in another, or in the case of institutions and nations, *many* others, do this:

"Seize the moral initiative. Find a creative alternative to violence. Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person. Or, in the words of the Affirmation this morning, *It is respect for self which makes resistance conceivable*. Meet force with ridicule and humor, continues Walter Wink. Refuse to accept the inferior position. Expose the injustice of the whole system. Force those in power to make decisions for which they have not prepared. Take control of the power dynamic. Recognize your own power. Be willing to suffer instead of retaliate. Force the oppressor to see you in a new light. Die to fear of the old order and its rules. Seek the oppressors' transformation. In other words, don't resist with violent vengeance which goes on forever in a deadly spiral. Make your resistance to evil creative, not reactive; strong, not impulsive; based in deep principle, not ultimately in personal feelings of revenge, as powerful as they certainly will be."

To which I would add, "And don't waste your precious time *expecting* that annoyances, perils and outright evil will disappear in your lifetime for some reason. No, to live a life of ethical and moral courage, to live out a life of principle and mission, *expect* to have to find ways to 'Seize the moral initiative. *Expect* to find a creative alternative to violence, etc.'"

Let me give you an example. Our interfaith BREAD organization is working with the idea of Restorative Justice Circles. When a young person commits a crime, instead of whisking them off to jail to "punish them" (which most often leads to teaching them more criminal behavior instead), they meet with the victims of their crime. They learn the consequences of their behavior first hand. They confront the snowballing hurt they caused. They may have to make restitution, or take a class on how to recognize dangerous thoughts, and to notice their own reactive impulsiveness for the first time. They have to look their victims in the eye. And then they sometimes see, as bell hooks reminds us, the victim inside themselves, perhaps for the first time. When you see that you are not separated out, but part of both the problem and the solution, headway is actually possible much, much, if not all of the time.

And back at Hawthorn Center, when we dealt with sociopathic kids who were prone to violence, we put them into groups with similar diagnoses. We used strict discipline, had strong clear and unrelenting expectations, and let them know the consequences. They had no internal conscience, so we made them one outside of their skins. And by doing all that, we had surprising success in changing behavior for the better. Not curing their illness, mind you, but giving them a way to deal with it. Kind of like what happened in the story this morning, a true story, as far as I can tell. Tying the two boys legs together forced them to stop seeing through the lens of the bigotry they were taught by their families and cultures, and made them look through the lens of their own eyes instead. To actually see the other person for real. To make them use their actual senses, not their insensitivities.

And to cap this morning's sermon, how about that song, *Revenge*, by the Guatemalan poet? He also is not naive, since his own beloved wife was killed by those Samoza family brutes. I like the title – *Revenge*. He admits that the feeling of revenge is real when you have been wounded so deeply. You want to take revenge. Of course! But then he masterfully turns it all around, reflecting bell hooks, reflecting Matthew's gospel's Sermon on the Mount, reflecting Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, countless women teachers in Afghanistan and Burundi, Gandhi, Tolstoy, Thoreau and so many others.

Now hear me, dealing with violence against women in domestic situations requires even more points than either Walter Wink or even Jesus were talking about. After all, they were talking social issues of oppression, not personal family issues. It's not a subject I can easily tackle inside a sermon of this length. It's connected, but also not connected, to everything I have said this morning. So I need to save it for another time.

But for me, the old news of human violence, and the recent news of human violence echoing the former, by both adults and children, is challenged magnificently by Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy's song lyrics, titled *Revenge*

*My personal revenge will be your children's  
right to schooling and to flowers.*

*My personal revenge will be this song  
bursting for you with no more fears.*

*My personal revenge will be to make you see  
the goodness in my people's eyes,  
implacable in combat always  
generous and firm in victory.*



*My personal revenge will be to greet you  
'Good morning!' in streets with no beggars,  
when instead of locking you inside  
they say, 'Don't look so sad.'  
When you, the torturer, daren't lift your head.  
My personal revenge will be to give you  
these hands you once ill-treated  
with all their tenderness intact.*

## **Offering**

### **Returning**

Word over all, beautiful as the sky, sings Whitman.

And so I too sing of the words that shelter us:

To commit – CVM MITTERE in Latin – meaning to go on a mission to do something beneficial, *together*, in days to come.

Days to come – plain anglo roots – meaning the future, from the Latin root FVTVRVVS, meaning "growing."

The growing future...meaning, not flying cars or subways to China, but all of us working together to provide spaciousness for all who are cramped tight; nourishment to all whose stomachs rumble;  
care and consideration to our whole natural environment of which we are all part and parcel;  
sharing responsibility for what we care for; admitting that we care for anything at all in the first place, and then allowing that care to burn like a candle that gives forth both light and warmth.

You, love, our best measure, and our best evidence of what is good, both now and in days to come, move among us. Move among us through our days as a reminder, not of who we are, but of who we can become – by growing, opening, blossoming, glowing.

## **Singing #1028 The Fire of Commitment**