

SLD07.20.08 16th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Romans 8:5-6, 12-17
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“Mahatma Gandhi: My Life Is My Message”

Have you ever seen the bumper sticker or t-shirt slogan, “Peace, like war, must be waged?”

Whatever else might be said about this morning’s saint, Mahatma Gandhi, who could argue but that the man dedicated his entire life to waging peace, in his heart, in his home, in his country, and in the world.

And if you think that waging peace is somehow more passive than waging war, you may want to know that, for all his abhorrence of violence as a means to an end, yet Gandhi insisted that the non-violent activist, like any soldier, has to be ready to die for the cause. Indeed, during India’s decades long struggle for independence, thousands of Indians were killed by the British. The difference was that the non-violent activist, while willing to die, was never willing to kill.¹ [Sound like anybody else we know?]

In Gandhi’s view, there are three possible responses to oppression and injustice. One he viewed as the coward’s way – to accept the wrong or run from it. The second was to stand and fight by force of arms, which, in his view, is better than accepting or running from the wrong. But the third way - to stand and fight solely by non-violent means – required the most courage and was best of all.

Born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1869, to a well-placed family in present-day Gujarat, Western India, Mahatma Gandhi grew up with a devout mother and the Jain traditions of the region, absorbing influences that would eventually play an

¹ www.mkgandhi.org/faq/q14.htm. Source: Mahatma Gandhi and His Myths by Mark Shephard.

important role in his adult life, including compassion to all sentient, or feeling, beings, vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification, and mutual tolerance between individuals of different creeds.²

When he was only 13, Mohandas was married 14-year old Kasturbai in an arranged child marriage, as was the custom in the region. The couple's first child, born when Gandhi was 15, only survived a few days, though Mohandas and Kasturbai were to have four more children, all sons.

Despite his early marriage, Gandhi continued his education through middle and high school, and eventually to college to become a lawyer, a profession that frankly held more interest to his family than to him. In 1888, he traveled to London to study law and there crossed paths with members of the Theosophical Society, an organization founded a decade or so before for the purpose of furthering universal brotherhood. Not having shown a particular interest in religion before, Gandhi began reading works of and about Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and other religions.

Subsequently, Gandhi returned to India to practice law in India, but limited success there prompted him to accept a year-long contract with an Indian firm in South Africa. The first photo on your bulletin covers shows Gandhi as an attorney in South Africa in 1895.

In South Africa Gandhi achieved greater success in his profession, but he also found there the most flagrant discrimination against himself as an Indian. After refusing to move from first class to a third class when he held a valid first class ticket, he was physically thrown off the train. Traveling further by stagecoach, he was beaten by a driver for refusing to travel on the footboard to make room for a European passenger.

² For this and the following biographical information, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi

Another time, a magistrate ordered him to remove his turban in court, which he refused to do.

These incidents comprised a turning point in Gandhi's life, awakening him to contemporary social injustice and prompting his passionate social activism. Prompted by a bill denying Indians the right to vote, Gandhi found himself becoming politically active, organizing the Indian community into a homogenous political force. Having experienced firsthand the racism, prejudice and injustice against Indians in South Africa, and witnessing the compromise that came through peaceful protest, Gandhi began to question his own people's status within the British Empire, as well as his personal role in his society.

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India desiring to be introduced to the issues, politics and people of his native country. One of his first major achievements came in 1918 when he intervened on behalf of the villages of Champaran. The people there, suppressed by the militias of British landlords, lived in extreme poverty. Yet the British still levied an additional oppressive tax which they continually increased despite the peoples' desperate conditions. In response, Gandhi organized a detailed study and survey of the villages, accounting for the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering amongst the people. Enlisting the help of villagers, he began leading a clean-up of the villages, including the building of schools and hospitals, and the training of village leadership.

...Until he was arrested for creating unrest. At which point, hundreds of thousands of people protested and demanded his release, which the court reluctantly granted. Finally, under Gandhi's leadership, the landlords signed an agreement

granting the poor farmers of the region more compensation and control over their farming. It was during this agitation that the village people began to address Gandhi as *Bapu*, which means “Father,” and *Mahatma*, an honorary title meaning “Great Soul.” The monikers spread, as did Gandhi’s reputation for strength in resistance against injustice.

Yet Gandhi’s strength throughout his and India’s struggle against the British came, not from armed weapons but from the tactics of non-cooperation, non-violence, and peaceful resistance. To Gandhi, all violence was evil and could not be justified, no matter which side, the “enemy’s” or his own, perpetuated it. Regardless of how incendiary the acts of the British or their Raj, nevertheless Gandhi consistently decried any violent retaliatory actions on the part of the Indians. Being assertive and on the offensive? Yes, even aggressively so, through civil disobedience and non-cooperation. “Satyagraha” was the term Gandhi used for non-violent action, which in his mind was “a way of life based on love and compassion.”³

Asks one author, Mark Shepherd, who wrote a publication called Gandhi and His Myths, “why did Gandhi employ this approach? Was he just trying to fill the jails? To overwhelm and embarrass his captors? Make them ‘give in’ through force of numbers? Not at all,” says Shepherd. “He just wanted to make a statement. He wanted to say, ‘I care so deeply about this matter that I am willing to take on the legal penalties, to sit in this prison cell, to sacrifice my freedom, in order to show you how deeply I care. Because when you see the depth of my concern, and how ‘civil’ I am in going about this, you’re bound to change your mind about me, to abandon your rigid, unjust position, and let me help you see the truth of my cause.’ In other words, says the author, Gandhi’s

³ www.mkgandhi.org/faq/q17.htm

method aimed to win not by overwhelming, but by converting his opponent, by bring about a ‘change of heart.’”⁴

“Sound naïve?” asks Shepherd. “Well, it is,” he says. “To my knowledge, no civil disobedience campaign of Gandhi’s ever succeeded chiefly through a change of heart in his opponents. Rather, here’s what happened: Gandhi and his followers break a law politely. Public leaders have them arrested, tried and put in prison. Gandhi and his followers cheerfully accept it all. Members of the public are impressed by the protest and public sympathy is aroused for the protesters and their cause. Members of the public put pressure on the leaders to negotiate with Gandhi. As cycles of civil disobedience recur, public pressure grows stronger. Finally, public leaders give into pressure from their constituency and negotiate with Gandhi. ...There are variations on this theme in Gandhi’s campaigns but generally speaking, his most decisive influence on his opponents was more indirect than direct.”⁵

Lest you imagine that Gandhi held the law in disregard, hear his rules for civil disobedience: Only people with a high regard for the law were qualified for civil disobedience. Only specific, unjust laws were to be broken. No direct or physical coercion was allowed. Hostile language was banned. Destroying property was forbidden.

Civil disobedience in the form of the thoughtful, peaceful, and intentional breaking of unjust laws, and non-cooperation in the form of strikes, economic boycotts and tax refusals - this was how Gandhi believed India could gain complete individual, spiritual and political independence from the British. “No government can exist for a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

single moment without the cooperation of the people, willing or forced,” said Gandhi.

“And if people suddenly withdraw their cooperation in every detail, the government will come to a standstill.” And so it did.

To start the ball rolling, Gandhi reorganized the Indian National Congress, oversaw the writing of a new constitution, and set about improving the discipline and effectiveness of his people. He expanded his non-violent platform to include the *swadeshi* policy – the boycott of foreign-made goods, especially British goods. Linked to this was his advocacy that homespun cloth (khadi) be worn by all Indians instead of British-made textiles. He exhorted Indian men and women, rich or poor, to spend time each day spinning this homespun cloth, as he did, himself, a strategy intended both to inculcate discipline and dedication in the masses, and to include women in the movement.

In addition to boycotting British products, Gandhi urged the people to boycott British educational institutions, to resign from government employment, and to forsake British titles and honors.

Gandhi’s non-cooperation program enjoyed wide-spread appeal and success, increasing excitement and participation from all strata of Indian society. However, just as it was reaching its apex, Gandhi ended it abruptly because of a violent clash in the state of Uttar Pradesh in 1922. Fearing that his movement was about to take a turn towards violence that would be the undoing of all his work, Gandhi called off his campaign of mass civil disobedience. He was arrested on March 10, 1922 and sentenced to six years of imprisonment, of which he served two.

For the following decade Gandhi stayed out of active politics, focusing most of his attention on expanding initiatives against untouchability, alcoholism, ignorance and poverty. In 1928, however, when the British government appointed a new constitutional reform commission that did not include any Indians, Gandhi returned to public debate, leading Congress to call the British either to grant India dominion status or face a new campaign of non-cooperation with complete independence as its goal. The British did not respond.

On December 31, 1929, the Indian flag was raised in Lahore. Two months later Gandhi launched his famous 248 mile "Salt March" to the sea for Indians to make their own salt, instead of purchasing it from Britain. Thousands of Indians joined in the march. The British responded by imprisoning over 60,000 people.

Due to political pressure, however, within a year, the British government decided to negotiate with Gandhi. In return for the suspension of the civil disobedience movement, they agreed to set all political prisoners free. Unfortunately no real transfer of power took place.

When World War II broke out, Gandhi and his supporters made it clear through their most forceful movement yet, called *Quit India*, that they would not support the war effort unless India were granted immediate independence. Gandhi and the entire Congress Working Committee were arrested in Bombay in 1942 and held for two years. Because of his failing health, he was released before the end of the war. At the end of the war, the British vowed to transfer power to Indian hands. Gandhi called off the struggle and 100,000 political prisoners were released.

Over the next two years, many debates occurred related to the nature of the freedom of India and its partition into Muslim and Hindu-majority states. Gandhi was vehemently opposed to any plan that partitioned India into two separate countries, although he finally assented, and devoted himself to keeping the Indian warring parties at peace.

Still, on January 30, 1948, Gandhi was shot and killed by a Hindu radical whose extremist organization held him responsible for weakening India by insisting upon a political payment to the newly formed nation of Pakistan.

Although Mahatma Gandhi was not the originator of the principle of non-violence, he was the first to apply it in the political field on a huge scale. Important leaders strongly influenced by Gandhi's approach to political activism include Afro-American Martin Luther King, Jr., Euro-American Albert Einstein and Mexican American Cesar Chavez, South Africans Nelson Mandela, Steven Biko and Desmond Tutu, the prime minister-elect of Burma/Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, Pakistani Muslim peacemaker Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Tibetan Dalai Lama, and British-born devotee and activist, Madeleine Slade, also known as Mirabehn.

Gandhi's developed principles of discipline, non-violence and passionate concern for the greater good echo loudly across many faiths. In 1955 Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked, "Christ gave us the goals, and Mahatma Gandhi, the tactics."

You know, there's an irony to trying to distill the story, teaching and example of a soul as great as Gandhi's (or any other saint's, for that matter) into a single sermon on a single Sunday morning in one particular American protestant church. But if our aim is to

look for proof that the gospel can, indeed, be lived, then in my view, it's nevertheless important to make a stab at exploring the many diverse ways it is.

The God that you and I worship and seek to know is sovereign over all creation, over all humanity, over all that is good and life-giving, indeed, over all that is.

That's what the Apostle Paul believed when he preached to the seekers in Rome about the importance of setting their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, he told them, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. And all who are led by the Spirit of God, said Paul, are children of God. (Ro 8:5-6,14)

If we imagine that there is only one way to led by the Spirit of God, we limit God. If we imagine there is only one way God's Spirit can lead us, we limit ourselves.

So if each Sunday we can't quite fully capture or communicate the depth and breadth or ambiguities of the lives of our summer saints, yet perhaps our imaginations are stretched enough beyond the usual boundaries of our daily lives and faith, that we might even wonder ourselves in what boundary-breaking ways God's Spirit might be trying to lead us.

After all, "what is faith worth if it is not translated into action?" asks Gandhi. And that's a good question.

To the glory of God. Amen.