

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Deuteronomy 19: 15-21

Matthew 5: 38-48

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I. Introduction

This February, as we prepare ourselves for Lent, we're spending a couple of weeks looking at the lives of some of our great world leaders and what they have to teach us about our walk in faith. I'm jealous that you all got to hear Amy P.

McCullough here last Sunday talking about Nelson Mandela in that regard. I was up at Amy's church preaching there which was also fun, but I'm delighted that you all got a chance to renew your relationship with Amy as she came to share the word with us.

And I'm going to continue this process this morning reflecting a little bit on the life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

II. Embracing a New Role

Tenzin Gyatso was born on July 6 in 1935 in a small rural village in Tibet, and at the age of two he was identified by the spiritual leaders of Tibet as the 14th reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Now, that requires a little bit of unpacking. So, let me just tell you that many of you know that in Buddhism there is this very strong belief that the soul moves from one life into the next as it engages in the process of learning holiness. And we don't learn everything that we can in one life and so, we have to figure out how to continue to learn in that process. There's a belief that our souls are reincarnated as we continue that journey of learning. And the goal of that learning is to get to a stage of enlightenment where we have learned what we need to learn to live rich and whole and full lives. And at that point in Buddhist tradition, the soul moves out

of the cycle of life and reincarnation and suffering and into the place of nirvana where it is no longer part of the suffering of the world.

There are, however, in Buddhist tradition very special souls that are called “Bodhisattvas” who are souls that have received enlightenment. In other words they can move into nirvana but they choose to reincarnate so that they can remain on the Earth to teach us how we can continue the pursuit of holiness. This should be an idea that has great resonance for us as Christians as we reflect on the life of Christ, too, as God chooses to engage us in the incarnate one — in the incarnate word.

So, the Dalai Lama is the 14th incarnation of this soul that has achieved enlightenment and remains on Earth to teach us. Lama is simply a Tibetan word for teacher. It’s the Tibetan equivalent of the Indian word guru and Dalai means ocean. And so, the Dalai Lama is the teacher of the ocean of compassion and is the spiritual and political leader of Tibet.

Now, the Dalai Lama became a monk at the age of six and started the process of deeply immersing himself in his study of the Buddhist scriptures and in meditation and continued that throughout his young adult life throughout a very turbulent period in Tibet’s history. In 1950, the Chinese invaded Tibet. Tibet had historically been sort of a buffer country between India and China and China in 1950 invaded Tibet and the Dalai Lama was involved in conversations with Chiang Kai-shek about how the Chinese were going to be present in Tibet.

But in 1959, just as the Dalai Lama was finishing his studies, there was a very brutal period of repression on the part of the Chinese against the Tibetans and it forced

the Dalai Lama to flee into India where he set up the Tibetan government in exile. He moved from this place of being a very cloistered monk onto a world stage in which he had to play a very different kind of role. This is one of the things that has made him such an interesting and dramatic leader as he has grown into a place where he has become a teacher of the world about what it means to work for reconciliation and peace.

III. Working for Peace

The Dalai Lama's got some very powerful things to say to us about that that should resonate with us very much as Christians because they reflect in very compelling ways how Jesus encouraged us to engage in the process of peacemaking.

Let me start off before we get to Jesus' teachings on this, specifically, by talking a little bit about the Hebrew scripture passage that Jesus is commenting on because we often misuse these phrases when we talk about peace and retributive justice. And we often use the phrase -- you hear people say all the time, "An eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" -- you have the right to exact punishment.

It's important to keep in mind that in the context in which Moses is speaking to the children of Israel, life was cheap and violence escalated very quickly. So, a relatively minor dispute could become a life and death situation in that world very quickly and very easily. And so, Moses' words to the children of Israel are not about exacting retribution. They're about limiting retribution. So that the model is no longer someone who strikes you or injures you and you kill them. You only injure proportionately to the way you have been injured, only an eye for an eye or a tooth for

a tooth. So, Moses was helping reframe the issue of justice and retribution by limiting violence so that it didn't escalate to the place where people got killed.

And then Jesus, of course, takes us a step further by saying, "Any violence is going to escalate violence." And how do we as children of God break the cycle of violence? Jesus says, "You heard this said, you can only take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Let's take the next step. How do you respond to violence and oppression in a way that is life-giving and reflects who God is? And again, keep in mind here that he's speaking in the context of the Roman oppression of Israel.

This is a visual. Larry, can I borrow you for just a minute? We didn't plan this so, Larry's got to improvise with me. So, listen to the way that Jesus frames this verse. Jesus says that if somebody strikes you on the right cheek turn to them your left, right? No, I'm not going to strike Larry because he'll break me over his knee.

But look at the visual here, this is Larry's right cheek. Now, if I'm right-handed as people were taught to fight with their right hand then, how am I going to strike Larry on his right cheek? I've got to backhand him, right? Which is not only meaning I'm hitting him, I'm demeaning him. I'm treating him as less than equal as I oppressed him.

So, when Jesus tells the disciples, "When someone strikes you on your right cheek turn to them with your left." He's not saying be passive. What he's saying is, "I have just demeaned you," and you're going to say, "No, you treat me like an equal even if you're using violence." You forced me to engage you as a person. You looked me in the eye and you say treat me as an equal, even in that context. What Jesus has

offered us as an idea is that we change the dynamic of violence when we choose not to engage violence violently, but we do choose to engage the injustice that the violence is perpetrating. Thank you, Larry.

Likewise, in this passage about if someone forces you to go with them a mile, go with them two. In that context, a Roman soldier had the right to take anybody that he met along the road and say, "You're carrying my pack for a mile." Because the Roman soldiers were marching all over and this was a right they had. But it was a limited right, they couldn't force you to carry a pack more than a mile or else they got in trouble because they've abused that right. So when Jesus says, "If someone forces you to carry a pack a mile, carry it two." What is he saying?

He's saying, you engage them in a way that highlights their injustice and risks getting them in trouble because they have inflicted that injustice on you. He's not saying be subservient and be passive. He's saying engage injustice wherever you see it with activity and energy but not with violence. Because when we hold up someone else's injustice in front of them, maybe, there is a converting moment there, a moment that they can see the injustice that they are inflicting and choose to engage in a different way.

That's what peacemaking is about. Peacemaking is not avoiding conflict. If someone has just struck me and I turn and invite them to strike me again, I am not avoiding conflict; I'm holding up a mirror to injustice and trusting that that becomes a moment of conversion and change.

This is what non-violence resistance is always about. It is about holding up a mirror to injustice so that injustice can be transformed. And the Dalai Lama is brilliant at this. This is why he drives the Chinese so crazy because everywhere he goes he highlights the injustice that is happening in Tibet. And nobody likes being told that they're inflicting injustice. Amen?

So that part of the invitation that the Dalai Lama shares with us is that wherever we are we have an opportunity to engage and to highlight the places in our society where injustice resides. He has taken his instance of injustice and he has helped all of us understand what injustice looks like everywhere in the world as we are called to engage in the process of becoming peacemakers.

Peacemaking is about acting in a way that God would act in that situation. Jesus is very clear on this that we are called to love the people who hate us. Now, we hear those words all the time but think about what that means. Frankly, it's hard enough to love you all when I love you, right? Being called to love the people that hate us is a powerful, dramatic, almost inconceivable call.

But Jesus says, "If you can't do that how have you come to embody God? How have you come to express the fact that you are God's children?" Because frankly, anybody can love the people who love them, anybody can do that. Animals do that. Anybody can love the people who love them. How do you go the next step to express love for people that don't love you, and that may hate you and that may be oppressing you? That's where we start to grow as spiritual beings.

The Dalai Lama gave a talk on the *Sermon on the Mount*, he's got a great love for the *Sermon on the Mount*, and said, "This passage reminds of a passage in a Buddhist text in which the Shantideva who's an Indian guru, asks if you do not practice compassion towards your enemy then towards whom can you practice it?"

It's an interesting question. The assumption there is it's not really compassion if you're just showing love for the people who love you. If you can't practice compassion towards your enemy, who can you, practice it with?

And then the Dalai Lama goes on to say, "If you cultivate the right attitude, your enemies are your best spiritual teachers." Think about that. If you cultivate the awareness your enemies are your best spiritual teachers, because, he says, their presence provides you with the opportunity to enhance and develop tolerance, patience and understanding.

The Dalai Lama has embodied that call in a very compelling way. And he's done it in a way, also, that communicates powerfully with people across faith traditions. And I want to suggest that part of what makes that compelling is that the Dalai Lama is not trying to minimize differences between Buddhists and Christians or Buddhists and Muslims or anybody, he is so deeply steeped in his own faith tradition that he is able to speak out of that centered place of powerful experience in a way that communicates with all of us and invites us to find those places in our own tradition. That's what makes him such a powerful ecumenical voice. He's not minimizing differences between religions. He's so deeply rooted in his own spiritual tradition that he can find the places of linkage between his tradition and the ones around us.

That's the way we build peace. We don't build peace by minimizing the places where we see the world differently. We build peace by being so deeply rooted in who we are and who God calls us to be that we can then make connections with people around the world.

IV. Conclusion

In this same speech that he gave the Dalai Lama suggested that the call to be peacemakers is not a Buddhist call or a Christian call, it's a human call. And he says that if you were a Christian, it is better to develop spiritually within your religion and be a genuine good Christian. If you're a Buddhist, be a genuine Buddhist but don't try to do it half and half. That will only cause confusion, he says.

The Dalai Lama is a wonderful paradox of a man who is deeply steeped in his very specific tradition and because of how deeply he is steeped, he is able to make connections with people all over the world. As we hear through his voice a call to be peacemakers and in that process to become just a little bit more like God.

Amen.