

## **The Good News Is ... Revealed Through Nonviolence**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, March 8, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 5:38-41](#) and [Matthew 26:47-56](#)

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I know we're only three weeks into Lent, so it's a little early to be hearing the story of the arrest of Jesus. That's a Good Friday story, not a third Sunday of Lent story. After the US and Israel launched their attack of Iran last week, I decided I needed to talk about war and nonviolence, and the story of the arrest of Jesus is an important text to me as a foundation of nonviolence.

All four gospels say that when Jesus was arrested, one of the people who was with him drew a sword and cut off the ear of a slave of the high priest. Apparently, this enslaved person was in the party that came to arrest Jesus. The word translated "sword" in the New Revised Standard Version can also be translated "dagger," so we're probably not talking about a military weapon, though it might have been. Rather, this might have been a tool someone might carry or a weapon someone might carry for defense from robbers or wild animals.

In Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's tellings, it's not clear if the person who drew the sword was one of the 12 or someone else who was with Jesus that night. In John's gospel, the person who drew the sword is named as Peter, the one of the 12 who is considered to have been closest to Jesus. In all four versions of the story, Jesus' response to the injuring of this enslaved person was to tell the person who was wielding the blade to put it away. Then Jesus healed the injury. Matthew includes the line, "... for all who take the sword will die by the sword ..."

This story was one of many I started wrestling with in 1980, when President Carter reinstated draft registration. I had long opposed war, and I started the process of figuring out how I might articulate that opposition to a draft board. It seemed to me that this story of Jesus being arrested by the principalities and powers of his day so that they could execute him – and his reaction to all that happened was important. I understand the impulsive desire to protect Jesus, to put up a fight. And Jesus said, "Don't." Jesus tells his disciples to put away the sword. It seemed and it seems to me that Jesus was and is telling his disciples to be disarmed.

I'm not the first to say this. Sometime around the year 200, the church father Tertullian said, "Christ, in disarming Peter, disarms all Christians." In fact, in the early church, there was a general consensus that one couldn't be a Christian and a soldier.

By the 300s, this changed. In 313, Christianity legalized in the Roman Empire. In 381, Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire. And when Christianity started flirting with and then marrying political power, it lost its way. An example of losing its way is a justification for war that subsequently evolved.

Saint Augustine wasn't even 30 when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. I bring him up because he more than anyone, started to formalize the so-called "just war theory."

Supposedly, the just war theory put limits on when a country goes to war and, once at war, how they conduct war. Some just war theorists now add limits on how a war must end. I think the theory actually evolved to give the Empire theological cover for its warring madness.

The just war theory says that to go to war:

- The war must be declared by a competent authority. That is, it must be initiated by a political authority within a political system that allows distinctions of justice.
- There must be a probability of success. You don't go to war if it's going to lead to a stalemate or your own defeat.
- War must be the last resort. All other options have been tried and failed.
- The war must be in pursuit of a just cause. That is, innocent life must be in imminent danger and intervention must be to protect life.

Once in a war, it has to be conducted justly:

- Distinction must be made between military targets (for instance, military bases) and non-military targets (for instance, a girls school or hospitals).
- The amount of force used must be restrained so that what now gets called "collateral damage" is limited. Likewise, the force used must not outweigh the military objective. This is called proportionality.
- Military action must be militarily necessary. That is, *all* military action must be intended to help in the defeat of the enemy.
- Prisoners must be treated fairly.
- The weapons of war must not be evil in themselves. This restricts everything from using rape as weapon to using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

A cursory look at the Iran war shows it is not a just war. In fact, none of the wars the United States has been involved in during my life meet these criteria. And I don't think the United States has fought a "just war" since at least the beginning of the 20th century. This has led me to reach the conclusion that a so-called "just war" is just a war, and war can't be just. War is sinful.

World War II is often lifted up as a counter argument to my contention that we haven't fought a just war since at least the 20th century. And it might be that the reasons for getting into the war meet the just war theory's criteria. What's clear to me is that our execution of the war – I'm thinking about things like the fire-bombing of Dresden, the use of atomic bombs in Japan, and many other incidents – fails to meet several of the criteria of how a war is conducted.

I know that with our binary thinking, we tend to assume that we can either be active or passive, that we will be either the victor or the victim. But Jesus' way of nonviolence is a third way. It is a way to be active without being a victimizer. And aspects of this third way are revealed in our other scripture reading.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets up a pattern to his teaching. “You have heard it said,... but I say,...” Jesus takes commandments from the Torah and expands on them. In today’s reading, Jesus quotes a passage that is known as the *lex talionis*. It appears in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

There is much that could be said about the *lex talionis*. For today, let me just say that it was implemented to interrupt the escalating cycle of violence: You hit me, so I stab you, so you kill me, so my relatives kill you and another member of your household, and the next thing you know, it’s the Hatfields and McCoys. And the purpose of the *lex talionis* was to protect slaves and members of lower classes from capricious treatment by their superiors.

Jesus says that, instead of meeting violence with violence, violence should be met with active, nonviolent resistance. At first, it looks like he’s saying, “Be a patsy. If someone strikes you on your right cheek, offer them your left. If someone sues you for your inner garment, give them your outer garment, too. If someone makes you walk with them for a mile, go another mile.” However, if we hear this advice in the context of a class-stratified, honor/shame society, it has a very different meaning.

In 1967, MGM released the movie *In the Heat of the Night*, starring Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger. Poitier plays Virgil Tibbs, a Black police detective from Philadelphia, who ends up helping in a murder investigation in a small town in Mississippi. At one point during the investigation, Tibbs and police chief Gillespie go to question plantation owner Eric Endicott, a white man with significant political and economic power in the town. During the questioning, Endicott slaps Tibbs. A civilian (granted, a civilian with significant social power because he is white and he is wealthy) slaps a police detective. But it’s 1967 and the police detective he slaps is Black.

I’m going to show a clip of the slap here in a moment. If you’re willing to watch it, there are three things I’d like you to notice: How Endicott slaps Tibbs; Tibbs’ response; and Endicott’s reaction to Tibbs’ response.

Watch [this clip](#).

Did you notice that Endicott back-handed Tibbs. That’s not only a physically violent act. It is a disrespectful act. Slapping someone with the back of your hand says “you are less than me.” Tibbs slapping back with the back of his hand does the same thing. Rather than slapping back, Jesus says his disciples are to offer their other cheek. It’s a way of saying, “If you’re going to hit me, you’re going to have to hit me with your fist – as an equal.” Shame them into recognizing your worth, your equality.

If a person who sues you for your inner garment, if that’s the only asset you have, you’re poor. And if that person gets your inner garment (most likely to pay a debt), all you’re left with is your outer garment. Give them your outer garment as well, and you’re naked. In an honor/shame society, the person who forces you into nakedness is the one who should be ashamed. So, if you get sued for your one garment, give them your other garment, too, and shame them into recognizing their injustice.

There was one particular type of person who could make you carry their pack: a Roman soldier. But they were only allowed to force someone to carry their pack for one mile. If a soldier made you carry it beyond that, the soldier could get into trouble for

abusing you. So, after the soldier makes you carry their pack for a mile, insist on going another mile – and get him into trouble.

When we take these two passages together, one in which Jesus disarms his followers and one in which Jesus explains how to claim your power without becoming the violence you are against, we see an invitation to a life based in nonviolence. And more than that, we see Jesus' good news revealed.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' first act of public ministry is to teach in the synagogue where he was raised. He opens the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and he finds the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to set free those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That is the good news. That is the news that is revealed through nonviolence.

To be honest, the good news I want is to hear something that makes me *feel* good in the midst of the hellscape that is our current geopolitical reality. And that's not Jesus' good news. What Jesus has to say, the "good news" Jesus shares, isn't news designed to make me feel good. The "good news" challenges me. The good news is that all are invited ... and that means I need to welcome my enemies. The good news is surprising, not comforting. It's like a weed that messes up the garden, not a glass of iced tea. The good news is great love for God and neighbor ... and (darn it) my neighbors include the people I keep wanting to call "them."

Remember, Jesus' good news made the powers that be feel worse. Jesus' good news was about release of the captives and recovery of sight for the blind – and that so wiggled out the people in power that they killed him. Jesus' good news is that God's love is a call to create justice (because justice is what love looks like in public).

And this good news is revealed through nonviolence: when we embody it, not only as a strategy, but as a way of life.

Amen.