

Isaiah 42:1-4

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

For a long time, after I left the Army I entertained a sort of sympathy for pacifism. But in truth I saw it more as an ideal than a possible reality. During the early eighties, I would preach the doctrine frequently, and every time I did it somebody would meet me at the door of the church and ask, "It's all well and good, Don. But what if they attacked you, or people you loved? How would your pacifism work out then?"

You may be glad to know I hadn't mailed in all of my integrity-- as if my ongoing hypocritical habit of preaching and not practicing was not enough. While I would say that if personally attacked, I hoped I could "turn the other cheek"; the fact was and is that I could never be certain that I would turn the other cheek. Plus I could never come up with a faithful answer about the rest -- about the people I loved, or those in a weakened condition. In those days I believed that pacifism was the way to go, but I was nowhere near certain that I would be able to go there under particular circumstances.

Today I do not believe that pacifism is possible and I do not believe that it is always moral, and I know that if some of my professors from seminary days heard me say that, most of them, the ones who have died, would be spinning in their graves and those surviving, merely disappointed as if to say that Don has gone over to the dark side.

But I don't blame my professors. All of their ammunition-- pardon the expression-- is found in the Bible. It's the same Bible as the ones you own and I own. They didn't invent any of that, but they had read a lot about it. At least one of my professors spent World War II as a conscientious objector- if you can imagine anybody doing that. He willingly exposed himself to government experiments on the effects of malaria on the human body.

No, George Edwards had the courage of his convictions, he would not fight under any circumstances, but he was willing to risk his body and his health to further the science of medicine. He had the courage of his convictions just like millions "conscientious

non-objector” Americans who signed up as soon as they could and did their jobs the best they could.

It was people like George Edwards who turned the words of scripture to neon in the minds of many of those whom they taught. It was his and other’s understanding of the Bible and the words of the Bible itself, that led me to preach what in my inmost soul, something I believed might be impossible for me to practice.

But even if I could have found a way to discount Isaiah’s words; even if we could dismiss Isaiah by saying that he’s nuts, or maybe we could be more polite since he is-- after all a prophet-- and say that he needed professional help-- which in the sixth century BC was not available. But even if we could do that, we’re going to run afoul of Jesus and all that stuff about “turning the other cheek”.

I always thought that turning the other cheek was the more courageous act, since most people interpreted that sort of response as cowardly and in my world, being thought of as a coward was far worse than getting my butt whipped. No doubt you’ve heard some version of the Shakespeare’s words, "Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once." Add to that the satisfaction of retaliation which is denied when turning the other cheek! So much hurtful action and reaction is caused by our greater fear of being thought a coward.

But how could we not be moved by the prophet’s words?

For despite all of that, is not God’s way the better way? A few months ago I told you the story of a war between the Israelites and the Arameans-- we call them the Syrians. According to the Israelite scribes, Syria had been raiding into Israel for a long time. There’s absolutely no mention of Israel raiding Syrians, but remember who was doing the writing. Finally Israel (or maybe Syria) had had enough and war was declared. Elisha called upon God to strike the Syrians blind. While the enemy was blind Elisha lured them into the middle of the city of Samaria, where they were surrounded by the Army of Israel. Elisha then asked God to restore the sight of the Syrians, which God did. The king asked Elisha, “Can I kill them now?”

It would be impossible for me to describe to you the discomfort of the trapped Syrians!

Elisha replied that since the king had done little or nothing to contribute to Syrians’ predicament, he had nothing to say about the outcome e.g. don’t kill them. Elisha told the king to give the captured enemy food and drink and let them return to their homes. The king obeyed. The Syrians were given a great feast and allowed to leave. The punch line of the story? II Kings 6:23, “And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.”

Mission accomplished with no more bloodshed. You see, God’s way is the better way for at it’s most intimate, God’s way is gentle, as gentle as the breath that cannot extinguish the guttering flame; as gentle as the touch that is unable to break the wounded reed. We expect a sword but receive a caress. We deserve hell, but are

showered with grace.

All of this is supported by the words of Jesus in places like the beatitudes and so my question is why don't we pay more attention to Elisha whose final solution for the Syrians was most unexpected and grace filled? Or Isaiah who so beautifully spoke of the gentleness of God? Or even Jesus, especially Jesus, Son of the living God? Even Jesus who is the exemplar, the bright light that leads us through the darkness should we dare follow. The exemplar who was willing to die painfully and without resistance in order to show the way of peace.

The way of the Christian is the way of compassion. Compassion literally means "participation in the suffering of" another or others. Compassion is my main objection to pacifism, which can be a refuge for anyone who is unwilling to offer assistance. For example, suppose you heard noise in a neighbor's house that led you to believe someone was being badly hurt. Some people would do nothing, as with the tragedy of Kitty Genovese in her New York neighborhood, back in the sixties. Others would merely call the police (meanwhile the cries and crashing noises have not diminished) while the most radical pacifist might call the police, go to the neighbor's house, decide whether walking in was appropriate, and then try to position himself or herself between the victim and the perpetrator. Which I would add is a right it is an honorable course of action and would probably work except in extreme cases.

In the last example the one who interfered with the beating did so because he or she had compassion with the victim, literally felt the victim's pain and did everything short of violence to prevent any further damage.

But what if that didn't work? Suppose the police didn't show up right away? Suppose the compassionate person was hurt or disabled?

Or as I was repeatedly asked all those years ago, "what if they attacked people you loved? How would your pacifism work out then?" That's why I branded myself a hypocrite. It's wrong to stand at the curb and mutter how we feel another's pain, when all hell is breaking out in our neighbor's house. It's wrong pretend to feel the pain of another while sitting in front of the TV and watch while the reporter describes oppression tragedy, brutality.

That's why I don't understand elected officials who can hear cries of oppression all over the world and shake their heads and opine that because it isn't in our national interest to intervene, there's nothing we can do. So a few thousand more starve during a savage North Korean winter because the premier spends money on his army and their weapons. How sad, but it's not in our national interest to intervene. Let the criminal government police itself. A few thousand more women are violated in central Africa because there is no law and the men are without conscience and the women are mere instruments of pleasure, if rape can be called such. How sad, and what I want to know is, where are the women who might object to the brutal treatment of their sisters? Where are the women (to say nothing of the men) who say, "Enough!" This is ridiculous. It is unconscionable.

In a couple of dozen other countries around the world men and women are routinely arrested, not charged, no habeas corpus, often tortured, executed and the only due process is a bullet to the back of the head.

A little compassion might go a long way, if we as a nation are willing to stand behind the moral outrage we and our leaders are always talking about. But it's not just about us. What about the rest of the world? Apart from the Vatican, Iran and some Arab countries, is there another nation on earth that is as self-consciously religious as the USA? Are we practicing what we proclaim? Guess not, if it's not perceived to be in our national interest.

But I get it. It all comes back to me and the way I was; doing all that preaching about compassion and believing I was the only one in the right because I was running my mouth. I am trying to wrap my being around the idea of a gentle breeze and a soft touch that can spare the bruised reed and the dying ember. I am trying to say that I am willing to do something, write my leaders challenge them. Speak out!

And for goodness sake if I hear the noise of violence in my neighborhood, that I would be willing to call the police and find a way to stop it as gently as possible-- but with as much force as needed, because according to this scripture, God's way is also the way of justice.

And justice begins with me, with us, as a congregation, with us, as a nation, with us as a world community.