

Shine the Light: Seeing the Signs of the Times

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Matthew 5:1-14

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. I am in Washington to join with others in a an effort to Shine the Light on the institutional sources of violence and terrorism in our nation. Every day at 3:00 pm we will walk around one of the places where violence is imagined or supported and then walk to the White House where we will pray together. We invite you to join us. As we begin this witness I wish I could promise you that violence and terror will vanish forever, that our CPT colleagues and all detainees will be released, and abuse will forever be vanquished from our home in this world. In fact I can't promise you anything, not one positive result. Some sincerely believe that we will make things worse. Others sincerely believe that by choosing the language of Light we reflect an arrogance that may lead to further conflict. Many think we are just one more eccentric, misguided and irrelevant, maybe fanatical expression of Christian faith. Our message may be misinterpreted, maligned, or distorted in the media.

As we begin this Shine the Light experience we do so as imperfect, and often wounded people. But we are also people who have grown through our wounds and the pain of abuse that we have witnessed around the world. We have learned that light is more powerful than the absence of light. We have learned that the great forces of the world are frightened by the light. But every time we have to begin again, with our doubts, our unfinished confidence and our prayer that God's will can be done on earth as it is in heaven. In my comments today you will see great threads of hope given to us by the world wide church, by the Muslim world, and by our own culture which is yearning to rid itself of violence.

For the years that I was with CPT our teams tried to begin the day with common worship. I am sure our primitive attempts at worship must have looked wimpy to our Muslim friends whose ritual of five prayer periods every day always facing Mecca was so clear, and confident. I noticed over the years that when life got more dangerous and severe, Muslim prayer time become more disciplined. I also noticed that when we felt threatened, demeaned, or desperate to break through the silence of oppression with an act of love, our own worship which included scripture, songs and prayer became more focused. Sometimes in our confusion, laughter would lubricate our prayers. Other times a CPTer might jump up in the middle of our serious gathering seized by the Spirit with a message or a song. Some of us doubted the messenger but we knew

we might just as well start listening to the Spirit. Worship times launched us into discussions of the day's activities; or in times of discouragement someone would take initiative to rebuild the team's confidence. The internal silence was broken and now the real discussion about the oppressive outside silence began. What to do!!! Ideas spewed forth in a collage of chaos and the organizers in the team listened for the patterns in the chaotic threads. They searched for a way to weave it into a tapestry for action and witness, a cloth that would draw attention to the horror that the team was witnessing but with a luminous streak of hope that the darkness could not put out. When I was with CPT that was the way it worked some days when things were down.

Two years ago I was in Baghdad where I spoke with many Muslim leaders in the Mosques. For some it may have been their first contact with Christians. We listened to each other explain our work and our needs. Some understood that Christians thought of all of them as terrorists. Many were outraged by the disappearances of people in their community and the residual effect of the occupation which to them was terrorism. We were also concerned about these matters and found common ground. When we described our work in nonviolence and refusal to accept armed protection or rescue even when detained they listened and said, "That is what Islam is about. We can do that." Others said, "It wouldn't work here." I witnessed them open themselves to the power of peace based on fairness in Muslim tradition. So today the fact that so many Muslim leaders have spoken up on behalf of detainees including CPTers is not an accident. This speaking up is a way to counter act how faith is hijacked by states and groups working out of pain, anger and the energy of retribution.

We see similar strong words from Christians around the world who joined together in greater unity against war in this, the second Iraqi war than we have witnessed in 1700 years. We see discussions and initiatives of holy peacemaking instead of holy war. Within the silence of our faith we are reminded again and again of that light.

On that September 11 day I watched as the towers of finance and industry burned. I thought that this was an opportunity to put our best **agape love inspired imaginations** to work. The world felt broken. Why would God allow this, unless it was a reminder to us of our deepest task as Christians. When the CPTers were detained in Baghdad I was again reminded of how our

agape inspired imaginations were presented with another opportunity. The world abounds with opportunities that stretch our imaginations.

Terrorists of all kinds, guerrilla supported, organized crime, and state sponsored believe that their purposes and pains will be made right by killing an enemy. By lashing back we set the terms for still another generation of terror. Our culture has worked this way for more than 5000 years back to the days of city states in Iraq. Despite the weight of this cultural tradition our hearts are gladdened when we read the great outpouring of public criticism of the war in Iraq, a criticism that is growing. During the Viet Nam war it took us years to reach this point. In the space of less than three years we have reached a critical point where our government must acknowledge the great chorus of people for peace.

God did not create us to be instruments of violent retribution. God created us as peacemakers, instruments of light and salt, and people of sacrifice and prayer. The program of the Prince of Peace did not include repaying evil for evil. Jesus proposed a program of enemy loving. I don't presume to know the full power or dimensions of that program but I have enjoyed many occasions when I saw it work. The Prince's program suggested a complete paradigm shift of how violence is engaged. We live in a time when experiments to carry out this new paradigm are widely initiated, conflict resolution, nonviolent communication, nonviolent direct action, all of which have some roots in the stories of the Prince before he was killed by the State.

As we consider the great congregation of believers we are captivated by the legacy of pain, abuse, broken souls passed from generation to generation, some would say "unto the seventh generation" perhaps longer. I call upon us to awaken the souls of broken warriors, so hungry for hope, so ready to know the fullness of the Prince's program of peace, so wanting to believe.

What a blessing this century can be when Christians come together in a renaissance of peacemaking, harmonized and completed by the diverse gifts of nationality, culture, and gender. There is power in the people of faith to make all things new. I believe we have been placed here for a time like this to reinvigorate humanity's journey and show major results in the Prince's program. This is the time to be pastors to all God's family.

The termination of terror, torture and war is not up to Washington, or Baghdad, or Kabul or London or Tokyo or Delhi or Paris or Jerusalem. It is up to us. As we pray together we will find ways to take on more responsibility for the power that we have been given. The cost for us will not show up on your credit card. We have the power in our internal bank, the power of enemy loving. It has only one condition. If this power does not get used it molds, smells bad, dies and the residue might create another disease. Prepare for surprises. This detainee crisis on the back of a generation of torture and terror has shaken the Muslim world into genuine steps of faithfulness to the highest call within their tradition. I believe that Christians are feeling similarly called.

Twenty years ago during the discussions about the founding of Christian Peacemaker Teams I realized that despite so many voices to the contrary a sizable minority in our churches were joined by many other mainline and evangelical groups, and Roman Catholics representing a potent force for world peace. I believed that if organized we could fundamentally impact spiritual health, social structures and the perceived legitimacy of war and killing for nations and neighborhoods striving to achieve justice. The incredible power of active nonviolent peacemaking is a premier sign of our time. People of faith have witnessed the effectiveness of nonviolence to push back killing and violence often with amazingly small doses of organized action. We no longer need to be surprised by this.

The effectiveness of nonviolence has been adequately tested but we are in fact caught in the history that still waits for us to demonstrate this power fully. Over the last 20 years I have carried on conversations about nonviolence and faith in more than 20 countries often with people who are open to active nonviolence; but until it is demonstrated more comprehensively, they believe the threat of the gun must be maintained in order for society to be secure. The final elimination of military force, armed police and armed national and international guerilla action will be accomplished when a broader culture of nonviolence that rejects the gun is expanded exponentially.

In an age when millions are anxious about their security and long for structures that bring peace, the sign of hope that a peace church can bring people everywhere is breathtaking. Our work together up to this time has been preparation, like pilot projects where our faith and confidence are tested and our skills refined. Forty years of peace work has taught me that our world is waiting for us to move beyond pilot projects to invite the nonviolent Gospel of peace to

become fully visible and an active choice for every citizen of the human family. This can be the defining sign of the 21st century. "Where have you been all these years?" were the first words spoken to me during my visit to an Afghan leader some years ago?

This question reverberates in my soul every day as I try to pray?

How should we pray? Should we pray that our four friends be released? Should we pray that all detainees be released? Should we pray that God's will be done on earth as in heaven? Should we pray that the power of holy peacemaking will be revealed in its fullness?

As we pray let us remember...

- that our understanding of life and death may be clarified and expanded beyond their present limits.
- that our lives will be more in tune with God's spirit for this, our age.
- that in life and in death the highest good might be achieved through our prayer and sacrifice.
- that we can choose to be candles of light wherever the shadows stretch their long reach over hidden pain.
- that the Glory of God will be revealed and that all flesh, all creation will see that Glory together.

Amen