

## **“LOYALTY OATHS AND NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE”**

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Prologue for Scripture Reading.

We are all aware of the events of this week how the President strongly justified the emigration policy of removing children from their parents as they seek asylum and then, after considerable criticism from all five of the first Ladies of our country, and even Republicans, and especially religious leaders from all denominations, all agreeing that such a policy heartless, illegal, and immoral, and the President changed his mind.

He originally agreed with our Attorney General, Sessions, who defended the policy by declaring it was God’s will. Sessions, our chief law officer, actually said, “I would cite you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes.” Well, there many things wrong with that.

First, Paul is not God, and, secondly, when he declared that the governing authorities have been instituted by God, Paul simply got it wrong - even though Sessions quoted Paul way out of context. The divine right of kings is hardly the view of the great biblical prophets who were critically of most governments, or of Jesus who himself was a law breaker. Unfortunately, this single text of Paul has been used throughout history by tyrants to justify their reigns. This text was used to promote slavery, to legitimize Hitler’s policies, and even by those who did not want our country to revolt from Great Britain.

Well, I don’t think anyone here will defend this separating of children from their parents, although there is much to do for those already caged in detention. There is national march this Saturday, “Children Belong In Families.” 21 cities in Michigan.

Paul wasn’t always right. Like most of us he had his high’s and low’s. He has been often misquoted. Still he has written the finest definition of love as can found anywhere in literature in I Cor. 13. But let me close off with further words from Paul, words I meant to share with you this morning, even before Sessions decided to quote him. They are in part from the same chapter 13 and speak for themselves.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

Love one another as sisters and brothers; outdo one another in showing honor.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly,  
 Never be conceited.  
 Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
 If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.  
 Never avenge yourselves.  
 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.  
 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor  
 has fulfilled the law. Roman 12 & 13

### **“LOYALTY OATHS AND NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE”**

As to this morning’s sermon, it is said that in order to remain fully alive there is one thing we should never lose. Its imagination. And we may need it as I want to describe and unravel the latest writings of John Dominic Crossan, undoubtedly acclaimed to be the premier Biblical scholar of our day. He with his wife Sarah recently wrote the book, “Resurrecting Easter – How the West Lost and the East Kept Original Easter.” It came out a few months ago.

The book is really a scholastic journey, seeking to document Christianity’s earliest iconography, especially the artistic portrayals that depict the actual Resurrection of Jesus. It was actually a 15-year adventure with Sarah filming, classifying, and printing all of these artistic resurrection depictions. 130 of these icons are clearly printed in color in their beautiful book.

What the Crossans discovered was that in Western Christianity - Roman Catholic countries and Western Europe Protestant areas - the customary depiction of Jesus’ resurrection was as an individual event. Jesus is portrayed as exiting on his own from the tomb and only the guards are depicted who usually are either asleep or awestruck.

On the other hand, in Eastern Christianity, including Turkey, Russia, Armenia, Greek orthodox, they depict the Resurrection as a universal and inclusive event, and vividly displays Jesus’ bringing others out of the tomb, out of Hades, the realm of the dead, with him. You can see him holding the hand of Adam and Eve, along with others, symbolizing all of humanity.

This Eastern Universal depiction of the resurrection clearly has nothing to do with damnation or destruction but portrays symbolically a cosmic transformation of the human race, all in order to finally bring about what the great prophets long envisioned for this world – a universal, more enduring peace, when,

“God shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

And “they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid...and all the peoples will walk each in the name of its god.” (Isa. 2, Mic. 4)

What these icons are depicting is that a whole new world is meant to be made over with Jesus’ resurrection. It was as if God, who is the embodiment of justice and compassion, sought to realign the world, transforming it into a just and beloved community – a move away from the present world’s despairing violence and endless acts of hate and vengeance.

While on one of their explorations in Greece their guide took the Crossans to his little town of **Distomo** and were told the story, near the very end of WWII, that on June 10, 1944 in reprisal for an ambush by local partisans on his troops, the German commander allowed his soldiers three days of, an unlimited vengeance, before razing the village to the ground. The Red Cross, four days later found nothing, in **Distomo** but death and unspeakable acts of savage mutilation especially upon the women and children.

Shocked, Crossan thought to himself that even in warfare civilization should have protected this town from such a senseless barbarism. But then, more deeply, he asked himself what today will protect the whole planet from civilization itself?

Yes today, no matter how civilized we think we are, we know civilization continues to be on the edge of self-destruction. The **Doomsday Clock** was reset two months ago: two minutes to midnight, it went up 30 seconds after last year’s Presidential election. The threats are real, in fact, our human species can destroy our selves **Atomically, Biologically, Chemically, Demographically and Ecologically**, and that takes us up only to the **E** in the alphabet. Our world view, our behavior, needs to change.

That is the underlying message of Crossan’s book, to create a world not on the road to doom. And he believes that a new more correct understanding of the crucifixion

story should give us some hope, if we would clearly realize the crucifixion story is in fact a parable, an insight, against civilization as it now is. Against our proclivity to escalate violence with violence and to place our faith in more and greater weaponry and senseless retribution.

Yes, the crucifixion story is a story of violence, but much more. It depicts a Roman civilization that rules by the sword and how a non-violent resistance fighter, Jesus of Nazareth, engaged it. And though killed, left to us a revelation of how we must behave or our civilization may not continue.

It was in that kind of civilization, a world of imperial violence, code name law and order, with further revolts always in the air against the Roman occupiers, that Jesus was asked by a crowd that doubted his loyalty to his country. They wanted to know if we Jews should pay taxes to the Roman Kingdom? They were really asking Jesus of Nazareth whose side are you on? His answer, we know, was to ask the crowd for the coin that they pay the tax with. He looked at it and, holding it up, asked whose likeness and inscription is this? Whose icon, really. They said, Caesar's. And Jesus replied, well then "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." It was a marvelous answer but much more.

Some, especially today, interpret this as Jesus' support for the separation of church and state. But I don't think so. There is no brick wall between the religious and the state in our country, only a separation of powers. The first Amendment thankfully protects both religion, or no religion, as well as free speech, free press, free peaceful assembly. Freedom is our precious heritage.

Still a more faithful understanding of Jesus' answer is the weighing of ultimate values. For Jesus, God was ultimate, and God's character, that of compassion and justice, is what he would be loyal to. That is what Jesus trusted, and so whatever Caesar or the State would have him do, he would first of all weigh it before God. And really, how any of us make our decisions, how to act, or how to vote, ought to reflect the character of God who we serve, or however you name the ultimate values you would faithfully live by.

Our actions define our values. By our deeds we are known. And that is why so many have wondered how could it be that 81% of white evangelical Christians could vote for Donald Trump, given his behavior and agenda for this country is so different from what the evangelicals preach? Perhaps Christians don't all serve the same God after all. But even though that would be a fruitful discussion, I digress.

Let's go back to the imperial power that Jesus lived under. Rome is a typical kingdom of civilization. But Jesus too lived under a Kingdom. The one he taught us about through parables and especially the actions of his life. In a prayer to the God of justice and compassion he urged us to pray, "Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

When Jesus and the disciples prayed this prayer, they were actually declaring that in their lives it is God who is on the throne and not Caesar, or whoever would demand our earthly loyalty.

But note, God's Kingdom of justice and mercy, this Beloved Community, is meant for this earth. It is not about a future heaven. Heaven will be all right; it is the earth that is not. That is why the Lord's prayer focuses on daily bread - meaning we seek a fair distribution of food for all: that is why it focuses on debt forgiveness - meaning we must have an even-handed economy that works for all and not as we have today; that is why the prayer focuses on temptation - for our temptation is for revenge when we are harmed; that is why it focuses on evil, because we must confront evil and overcome it with good. The Lord's prayer is really a domestic revolutionary document and should be in the hearts of all people of good will.

Further, this Kingdom of God, this Beloved Community, that Jesus declared that has come and is in our midst, is an antitypical kingdom in a couple of ways. It is present now, but only in part. It remains an unfinished collaborative, a process to which we must all contribute. Isn't that why we report every Sunday to be inspired to greater service?

And, secondly, the Kingdom of God, this Beloved Community, is additionally antitypical because it is a major shift, from civilization's traditional imperial power. Its power is that of non-violent resistance, which reflects the loving life of a crucified non-violent Jewish leader, Jesus, who himself served under a compassionate and justice dealing God. The God who is evenhanded, not vengeful, "who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Mt 5:45)

And it is clear, Jesus lived a non-violent life against the imperial powers of his day and encouraged it. He did not advocate martyrdom. But he always advocated engagement. As Martin Luther King said when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, "Non-violence is not sterile passivity but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation." King had an Eastern understanding of the resurrection.

Jesus taught those who would serve God, to be wise as serpents and cunning as doves, even to turn one's cheek. Not as a retreat but always as a way to engage. That's our calling, to practice non-violent resistance to injustice however we can, and to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, and give a preferential option for all that are unjustly disenfranchised in this world.

So, with that, let us move to today's shaky civilization. And I don't need to tell this congregation that our country's present administration is largely a threat to much of what you as congregation stands for in this world. We must resist non-violently, as did he, to have a lover's quarrel with our own country, arguing against it when wrong and applauding it when right.

But let me briefly go to another prominent secular scholar in the field of Social Psychology who, like Crossan, is concerned with civilization's fragile foundation and the **dooms day clock**.

In the introduction to his excellent book, The Righteous Mind, Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion, Jonathan Haidt confesses "when I was a teenager I wished for world peace, but now I yearn for a world in which competing ideologies are kept in balance, and for systems of accountability to keep us all from getting away with too much, and for fewer people believing that righteous ends justify violent means. Not a very romantic wish, but one that we might actually achieve."

Haidt is right to point out if we are to reverse the Doomsday Clock we need to address how competing ideologies may be kept in balance. And we must also develop more systems of accountability, so equity and the common good, will have a greater chance in this world. And most certainly we must walk more humbly so our behavior will not add to the escalating violence of this world.

That is why we need more democracy in this world, not less, and to resist the dictators, bullies, and oligarchs, especially in our own country. As Hamilton and Madison warned us about our new republic government, "The whole thing will only work if the government is run by people of good character and intent."

This is why we need to relate internationally beyond our walls, support the United Nations and its benevolent agencies, and submit to the world court so that compassion and justice are combined. We need to work with all groups that exist to promote "the right of all to equal dignity and integrity of life." And actively and non-violently oppose groups who do not.

We need to work with all the great religious groups seeking the peace of the planet beyond themselves. We need to be in alliances that promote non-violent change that would displace vengeance. We must resist, as in Brexit, into going it alone.

We all have a lot of work to do in every corner of the world, but since we are citizen here, we need to resist our own country with its myopic policy, “America First” which has pulled us further away from our international treaties and obligations and has polluted our nation’s soul. We have long been considered the leader of the free world but our recent actions have tarnished us, creating a hole in our soul.

If this country needs to be first, let us be first in supporting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which puts us all on an even playing field.

But just this week the USA withdrew from the world’s most important human rights body, the UN Human Rights Council, because we didn’t agree with some of its decisions. How backward can we get?

We also have the danger of ruining the earth apart from a nuclear holocaust. Climate change is real and our civilization has contributed to its threat. It will take all of us working together to slow it down before we burn ourselves up.

That the Paris Agreement on Climate Change has brought together over 200 countries to voluntarily work together gives us some hope. But five months after becoming President, he announced the U S A “would cease all participation.” Vice President Pence said that President Trump “demonstrated real leadership by pulling out.” Real leadership? We are now the only country that is not in. But this is typical of the most bewildering administration our country has even had.

Again, I hardly need to remind this congregation of how regrettable that kind of leadership is for our country.

I was pleased to see that you here at Harbor are in the process of becoming a Green Sanctuary. Excellent! Every effort counts.

And, yes, let me add that there are bright spots today in our society such as the Women’s March on Washington. A giant display of non-violent resistance! Larger than those that gathered for the Presidential inaugural. And there is the Student Movement Against Gun Violence, and the People’s Climate March. And many other concerted efforts of resistance. People have been energized again to be a part of a government of, by, and for the people.

And while there are so many ifs about how wise the effort of the administration will be in resolving nuclear weaponry in the Korean Peninsula, let us be appreciative of the first efforts that the President did make. I was always taught that reconciliation will not occur without relationships. So it is good to reach out, to talk and meet even handily with all on this planet, friend or foe. Unfortunately, our administration walked out on the previous negotiated treaty with our allies to work creatively with Iran. One step forward, two steps back!

Just a final thought on this rambling sermon. It's about loyalty, as you have probably guessed. We are all aware the question of loyalty was raised in the White House recently and it led to persons being fired because they would not give their complete loyalty to President Trump.

Others have come and gone because they could not support his policies. This led directly to a Special Counsel by the Department of Justice, led by Robert Mueller, who has remained at his task these many months. Most everyone believes he is a person of integrity, a rarity these days in Washington. Whatever, he looms over a constitutional crisis with our government that is still before us.

But let me finish. On this matter of church and state, I am assuming your loyalty, your faithfulness, is either the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, or to the Unitarian Universal Principles. I think they are virtually similar. And that is our common call to practice non-violent resistance to injustice, however we can, and to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

But we are also citizen of these United States. And where is our citizen loyalty, our faithfulness, to be placed?

To just our own family? No. To our political party? No. To our President? No. No. No.

We the people stated our loyalty best in our Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal, with unalienable rights, for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Such a declaration, "that all men are created equal," (of 1776) we now know needed more work. It would need to include more races, more genders, and more expansiveness.

But, thankfully, now it does! Quite gloriously, this rather divine pronouncement, that "all persons are created equal", never looked so good legally as it does today, even though this inclusive social compact is now being threatened by our present



administration. These gains must not be reversed even though racism, homophobia, sexism, and xenophobia are still menacing around us.

Yes, let us be loyal to that, that all persons are created equal and loyal also to our Nation's Constitution. In it we swore that we the people would make our union more perfect by "establishing justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare for all." Yes! That is our citizenship loyalty pledge and that is the work ever before us, promoting the general welfare of all.

Resist anything less! Nonviolently and with more hugs. There remains, on balance, a great work of equity before each of us. Let us not despair. "As in heaven, so on earth."