

Resistance as a Spiritual Practice

Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Glenn Leupold, Co-pastor
First Presbyterian Church, Albany, NY
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Jeremiah 6:6, 9-10, 12-15 & Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only [God]."' ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

It is a delight to be back with you all here in Rensselaerville. It cannot help but be a joy for any preacher to come and be a part of this historic, ecumenical, interfaith and summer-focused place. While there are a few similar faith communities around the world, this one is certainly unique.

I definitely admire your theme for the summer. I like how you are trusting that everyone who hears your theme will know what it is that must be overcome in order to go forward and what injury it is that needs healing. I do not think you are talking about the annoying Fake News outlets like the NY Times that are saying all these false things about our president. Nor do I believe the obstacle you have in mind are all those who are leaking information about the inner workings of the administration. Nor do I think you are concerned about the massive voter fraud that "somehow" allowed a qualified female former senator from this state to somehow receive around 3 million more votes than the man currently in the White House. No, I don't think you are concerned about any of those. It is my assumption that the crisis you have in mind is the train wreck that is the current U.S. administration and the strife it has unleashed in all areas of government and among all types of faith communities.

I also appreciate your optimism in the theme. “Finding a way forward” sounds like you are certain there is a way. Yes, I appreciate the qualifier, “Is there a way to healing?” that introduces some uncertainty. Such a question makes room for a variety of answers. Like, “Definitely not.” Or, “maybe later on.” Given my sermon title, I’d like to start with something I am NOT saying.

When I think of resistance as a spiritual discipline, I am not referring to *resistance to change*—a common tendency in many churches—summed up in the phrase, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Jesus turned his first century world upside down, claiming the then-current system in Palestine was not really glorifying God, not creating God’s kingdom and was instead burdening the poor, the widow and the orphan. Sin was enslaving God’s people, individually and collectively. Anyone who follows Jesus cannot claim that he was in favor of never changing anything. He changed everything for his followers. He even changed the Passover meal from a meal to remember the final plague against Pharaoh in Egypt to a meal to remember him.

And in today’s text in Matthew, Jesus says no to a few offers that would give him some well-being, some “peace”. He is offered some tempting alternatives to his life’s purpose. He is tempted to take the easy way out of his hunger by changing stones to bread. He is tempted to make sure he really is the unique son of God by jumping off the Temple and thus forcing God to catch him. And he is tempted to claim earthly power and wealth for himself if he only stops worshiping God and instead worships the one claiming the ability to give wealth to him. He is offered a prosperity gospel and says no. He is offered a cushy, soft life of peace, and says no.

He is stronger than the temptation of the bread, and eats later. He is certain of who he is, so he does not need to have God come and save him, and prove he’s the messiah. And he is certain who it is that is worthy of his worship. He remains on a path to the cross. These were tempting options, yet Jesus said no to each. I believe Jesus’ response can serve as a template for how we must resist today.

As a spiritual practice, resistance means resisting that which is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Resistance is the act of not allowing oneself to be part of systems and behaviors that are contrary to God’s will.

An act of charity like feeding the hungry is not really an act of resistance; it’s an act of love, and a good thing—but it’s not resistance. *Attacking* someone who is acting contrary to the Gospel is not resistance. That’s attacking, and that’s an act in violation of Jesus’s call to love our enemies. Resistance means not to be co-opted, even by systems and people that may seem attractive. It means being wary of those who want us to compromise; those who say “things are not so bad”; those who tell us “all is fine” and say, “Peace, peace” even though there is actually no peace at hand. Resistance as people of faith means living our lives based on being certain who it is that is worthy of our worship.

For the past several years, the Session of my church in Albany has adopted a purpose statement that is actually a statement of resistance: “Called by God to reduce the widening gap between rich and poor.” A system that funnels the majority of a nation’s wealth to the top few percent of its citizens is guaranteeing an ever increasing level of misery for the majority. We adopted this statement because we feel it is work to which all people of faith are called. When we all help the poor and miserable to equip themselves; when we speak out against rampant inequality; when we endorse actions that will decrease the wealth gap, we are engaging in an act of resistance. We are resisting those forces and people who think the widening gap is a good thing—one of whom is in the White House.

Sometimes resistance can be subtle, speaking to a person who seems sad. It can be a little risky, like deciding not to agree with someone’s mean-spirited comment about a person of color. At other times in the life of the church, resistance could in no way be subtle. At times, healing has had to wait.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a pastor in Germany during the 1930s when his country became part of the Axis powers. He saw people around him using their power and position to do things contrary to the Gospel, like scapegoating Jews, ridiculing traditional journalists, restricting voting and actively seeking war. In one of his sermons he said,

Christianity has adjusted itself much too easily to the worship of power. It should give much worse offence, more shock to the world, than it is doing. Christianity should take a much more definite stand for the weak than for the potential moral right of the strong.

Though Bonhoeffer was executed in prison just weeks before the end of WW2, he spoke out in favor of resistance against the worst imperial impulses of Nazi Germany. He hoped to appeal to the large number of Christians in Germany, noting that it was mostly Christians that had legitimized militarism, racism and economic exploitation. He believed these sins grew from a belief system that fell far short of actual Christianity.

Surely we can still agree with him, that the imperial sins of militarism, economic exploitation, racism and sexism are wrong. Like Bonhoeffer, we believe in Jesus, a man who marched into the Temple during its most busy week, disrupted its market place, overturning the tables of the profiteers and proceeded to occupy it while telling stories that exposed the complicity of the high priest, the Pharisees and scribes with Rome—a foreign power. Jesus was so offensive that those in power kept “looking for a way to kill him,” as Matthew says later. Jesus, and all the prophets before him, disrupted the injustices of their day by going to the Temple, the palaces, and the places of sacred meaning, and resisting.

We too are called to break the cycle of Christians supporting imperial sins. As Pastor Jin Kim of the Church of All Nations in Minneapolis often says, “The church provides the foot soldiers for the American empire.”

When our government is doing the very things Jesus complained about, we need to resist. In doing so, we will sense God with us. For those of us who have been resisting for decades, it has become a spiritual discipline. There will be a time for healing, but first we must resist those who are doing the damage. Later, there will be time for healing. When the time is right we may say, "Peace, peace" and be speaking truth.

Until then, unfortunately, there are several things to resist. Resist those who want to destroy the environment, not cuz you're a hippy but because of your faith. Resist racism when you find it, not because you "hate your own kind" but because of your faith. Resist efforts to deny help to refugees, not because you are "naïve and gullible" but because of your faith. Resist efforts to delegitimize LGBT folk, not because you are some kind of "bleeding heart" but because of your faith. Resist misogyny and those who want to take away women's rights, not because you are a rabid feminist, but because of your faith. Resist efforts to make decent health care only affordable to the rich, not because you are a lackey for the Affordable Care Act, but because of your faith. Resist efforts to deny a fair wage to all workers, not because you think capitalism is hopelessly bankrupt, but because of your faith. Resist efforts to mistreat alien visitors and foreigners, not because you are anti-American, but because of your faith. Resist efforts to demean and ridicule our Jewish and Muslim neighbors, not because you really like being "politically correct" but because you are a Christian. Resist efforts to put all our trust in our military instead of in God, not because you are foolish, but because of your faith. Resist and do not cooperate with government policies that are contrary to the Gospel, not because you *want* to defy the government, but because you are a Christian. Resist evil when you see it instead of goofing off, playing games, surfing the 'net, or going shopping, not because you dislike leisure, but because of your faith. Resist the siren call to spend your time and energy gaining wealth and instead use it to pursue justice, not because you are unmotivated to succeed, but because of your faith.

Jesus found a way forward in difficult times by focusing on God's word, avoiding unnecessary wealth and trusting God. He practiced resistance. For us, resistance is a spiritual practice that can take you as close to God as all the martyred saints of the church. It can give your life purpose.

Surely it is Christ who walks beside us in all acts of resistance, reminding us, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for my sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Given so many spiritual practices that are self-focused, resistance is better in my book, since it is others-focused. When we resist, we are being Christ-like; we are walking with him. If walking with Christ is not a full-fledged spiritual practice, I don't know what is.

Let us pray: Holy Lord God, be with us as we follow in Christ's footsteps. Keep us mindful of who it is that is worthy of our worship. Give us courage to resist that which our Lord would resist. Move us to embrace that which our Lord would embrace. Grant us the wisdom

to discern between them. We thank you that you have shown us a way forward, for the path to healing goes through justice. Amen

This sermon borrows a bit from an article by Stephen Mattson, "We're Not Anti-American; We're following Christ," in *Sojourners* magazine, 2/23/2017.