

# UNARMED AND DANGEROUS:

## A GOSPEL OF NON-VIOLENCE IN A VIOLENT WORLD

by John Bennison

*Right: "Arrest of Jesus" - Duccio di Buoninsegna, d.1319*

Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not assault me. (Mt.26:55)



*"The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun."*  
NRA spokesperson, Wayne LaPierre

*"But I tell you: don't react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well."* Jesus of Nazareth, according to Matthew

## SWEARIN' AND CURSIN'

We recently observed our annual national holiday in commemoration of Martin Luther King, a civil rights leader and gospel preacher, who was also the prophetic voice of non-violence in our age.

This year, the holiday coincided with the Inauguration, including the swearing in ceremony of the President and Vice-President in our nation's capital; a city where a memorial now stands with a larger than life size statue of a slain leader who was neither a politician, statesman, nor military hero.

At the inauguration ceremony, the VP was first sworn into office, using the Biden family Bible that looked to be the size of the New York City phonebook in its sheer heft. Then it came time for the Chief Justice to administer the oath of office once more to the President, the "leader of the free world," and commander-in-chief of both our armed forces and armed conflicts around the world.

The President had chosen not one, but two, stacked Bibles on which to take the oath. The bottom one once belonged to Abraham Lincoln, and the other was Martin Luther King's "travelling" Bible.

The symbolism on this day of dual observances, and with this particular president, was none too subtle; given his mixed racial background. One Bible had once been read by a president who lost his life to a lone gunman in his efforts to free a people from bondage; the other by a descendant of freed slaves, who died from a gunman's bullet; while trying to emancipate a nation from its lingering, discriminatory injustices, and providing an alternative dream and vision of what we, as a people, might still become.

The sixteenth president of the United States had once presided over a horrific civil war; general consensus being it was a necessary means to a just end. The slain preacher from a segregated South had employed a very different tactic of non-violent resistance to defeat the forces of injustice and inequality, refusing to return evil with evil. And for their trouble, both were cursed by at least one man, armed with a gun. A bullet in the head violently ended both their lives; just as victory for their greater cause was in their grasp.

I could not help but wonder about that ceremonial act of swearing one's oath, one's allegiance, one's heart and soul, with one's hand placed on a stack of Bibles. Do the promises sworn bear any resemblance to any of the words imprinted on those many pages bound between the front and back covers of that thick book? If so, which passages? For surely just as many similar stories such as that of Abraham or Martin -- waging war or refusing to raise one's hand in retaliatory anger -- can be found in that compendium of books we call the Bible.

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But in the end, for those of us who would even consider the disarming and dangerous words of a Galilean sage named Jesus, what does it mean – even require – if we were to claim we would heed, accept and follow as his disciples?

## HOW THE WEST WAS WON

My long-departed paternal grandmother was once the proud president of the North Star Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She was in every sense the typical family matriarch; at once stern and loving, opinionated and adoring, with a sense of propriety that was second to none.

She was also a staunch churchwoman. Her most impressive accomplishment as far as I was concerned as a boy growing up in the fifties was the fact she had once taught Sunday school lessons in the city of Minneapolis to Jimmy Arness; who grew up to play the role of Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke*, the most popular TV western series of all time. As far as I was concerned, watching the latest episode every Saturday night throughout my childhood was as much a religious observance as anything that followed Sunday mornings.

The stories of Marshall Dillon, his sidekicks Chester, then Festus, along with Doc and Miss Kitty the saloon "hostess" might have varied slightly each week. But the intro always began the same way, like any good liturgy. A towering Marshall Dillon would step out into the middle of Dodge City's dusty and deserted main street. The lone figure of someone ready to challenge the law and order of the town would appear at the other end of the street in a standoff. The bad guy would draw his gun first, and two shots would ring out. Then, following a brief pause, Matt would slide his six-shooter back into its holster as the smoke cleared. That's how the wild West was won. And for a boy growing up in the fifties, it was wildly entertaining.

There was also a none-too-subtle message repeated with each episode. Might makes right; particularly when combined with righteous might. Not only that, the good guy always wins. Which is, of course, a lie.

## BIBLE WINNERS AND LOSERS

Based on my own many years of faithful Sunday school attendance, it made me wonder just which action-packed Bible stories my grandmother might have once taught her students. Moses was certainly a good guy, who defeated Pharaoh's pursuing armies; engulfing them in the Red Sea with the wave of his righteous rod.

And young David, armed only with a slingshot and a good eye, dropped Goliath like a stone. But why exactly he had to then take the giant's own sword and chop off his head for a trophy was something I might have wondered about; had that not been omitted from my children's book of Bible stories. I'm sure my grandmother would certainly have preferred a modicum of discretion. After all, spiking the football is just bad taste.

Still, there are other Bible stories about good guys whose dismal fate I don't recall hearing as much about when I was growing up. John the Baptist, loses his head (literally) over a disgruntled whim of Herod's step-daughter (and step-niece – Herod having married his brother's former wife). I suspect John's condemnation of Herod's incestuous behavior in violation of Jewish law was something Grammy probably never would have taught Jimmy Arness. Regardless, the good guy certainly doesn't come out the winner in that one.



Above: *David with the head of Goliath* - Andrea del Castagno, 1423-1457

There's the story of Stephen's emboldened, but unwelcomed preaching before the religious hierarchy (Acts 6-7). As we all know, reaction to such fervor can be violent. When sufficiently enraged, the weapon of choice in those days was often an incited crowd with a fistful of stones.

So Stephen is pummeled to death for preaching his gospel. Then Peter (according to legend) gets crucified upside down for finally finding enough courage to refuse to deny Jesus in death what he found himself unable to do in life. And there was Paul – the “ambassador” for Christ – who may have wasted away to death in jail.

Good guys all, all meeting a rather ignominious end; in an ancient world rife with violence, brutality and the constant threat of death for those who couldn't, or wouldn't, raise a hand to defend themselves.

And that doesn't even begin to beg the question about the one portrayed as the *perfectly* good guy: Jesus, the good shepherd of the sheep.

Coming up with a reason the good guy *loses* – and thereby somehow makes losing a good thing and the winning ticket -- has resulted in more than twenty centuries of convoluted theological shenanigans; culminating in the notion by some that this good guy died for all us bad guys, thereby making all us bad guys good enough to share eternity with the Good Guy. So, never mind, go ahead. Our continued cursed, violent ways have already been atoned.

Grammy never explained that one either.



Above: The Stoning of Stephen – stained glass  
Trinity Episcopal Church,  
Boston

## JESUS WAS NO ITINERANT GUNSLINGER

*Paladin* was another cowboy hero from the TV westerns of my boyhood. Uncharacteristic of the other good guys, the character played by Richard Boone was dressed all in black.

Gruff and tumble rough on the outside, he had a heart of gold for good folks, but spared no mercy for the bad guys. He roamed the wild West, looking to rout out trouble wherever needed. His simple calling card: “Have Gun Will Travel. Wire Paladin, San Francisco”



Jesus was also an itinerant *good* guy; at least in the eyes of those who subsequently made a lasting legend out of his character in the decades following those numerous showdowns recounted in the gospels. He ultimately bit the dust at the hands of those who weren't necessarily faster on the draw when it came to discursive retorts, but clearly had him outgunned. If the Galilean ever had a calling card, it might have read: “No gun, but travels. Follow Jesus, Nazareth.”

There is no historical basis to lead one to believe Jesus was ever armed with anything more than a healing touch, a compassionate heart, and a message that -- while absolutely subversive -- was inherently non-violent. Why then was an unarmed itinerant peasant rabbi such a threat to those who could only fight back with the most commonly accepted and practical solution to that meddlesome *Jesus* problem?

Why? Because that's the way it so often works in this world. That's the way it worked back then, and the way it still works today. Ya' gotta fight fire with fire, and the more firepower the better. Might makes right; and righteous might – when convinced of divine favor tipping the scales in our favor – is better yet. It makes us winners; at least for as long as one's adversary can be quelled, with an uneasy lull we like to call peace.

But just as soon as the smoke clears from the barrel of the gun, we're able to see once again that retaliatory violence is nothing more than a perpetual cycle in human history. Nowadays we've gotten more sophisticated with the weapons sometimes employed. But whether slingshot or six-shooter, sword or drone, the tools employed are simply different means to the same never-ending *end*.

At the same time, Jesus was no naïve wimp and pushover. Far from it. In fact, it was his prophetic denunciations with which he refused to be silenced that were his undoing. And he did so, fully cognizant of the very dangerous world in which he lived.

For example, when he told the story of the good guy from Samaria (that most listeners would have assumed was the *bad* guy), he showed how we might alternately treat a nameless victim of violence left for dead as oneself, or one's neighbor. More importantly, such a tale was told in the context of the acknowledged reality just how dangerous the world is.

It was that same road Jesus himself trod from Jerusalem to Jericho that was filled with armed bandits. That was a given in this story; a story that contrasted the dispassionate observers of law and order (those respected authorities that "passed by on the other side"), from the disarming generosity of the *good* bad guy (the Samaritan).

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## JUST ANOTHER USELESS UTOPIAN GOSPEL?

[Jesus said] *"As you know, we were once told, 'An eye for an eye' and 'A tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you: don't react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it. Further, when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. Give to the one who begs from you; and don't turn away the one who tries to borrow from you.*

*"As you know, we once were told, 'You are to love your neighbor' and 'You are to hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. You'll then become children of your Father in the heavens."* [Mt.5:38-42]

Note: Walter Wink (Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, NYC), provides a thorough study of this particular gospel text in his classic essay, "Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way." An earlier commentary by this author entitled "Sword Fights" <http://wordsnways.com/sword-fights> Words & Ways Archives, May, 2011) provides a detailed summary of that informative work.

Of all the many words attributed to the unarmed itinerant sage from Galilee, some of those accepted by many biblical scholars as most authentic are found in that collection of sayings commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Among those teachings are the ones about refraining from retaliatory violence, and turning the other cheek in an act of non-violent resistance, and loving your enemies. Non-violent, peaceful resistance, Jesus unequivocally insists, wins; even if you lose your life to find it. How in the world does that work?

If someone strikes you, the two conventional options (and natural instinct) is to either fight or flee. If you fight, you either win or lose the round. If you flee, you lose the round, only to fight another day. Whether you're the good guy or the bad guy hardly matters. Whether it's viewed from opposite perspectives as suppression, repression, retaliation or oppression, little changes. Bottom line: it never ends.

Jesus' suggestion we offer the left cheek after the right is struck (as well as giving up every stitch of clothing and submitting to carrying a load twice as far as demanded) is so ludicrous -- even comic, with the images it conjures up -- that we cannot take it seriously, in a literal sense.

At the same time, however, it nonetheless confronts us with the equally ludicrous consequence of the alternative; that is, perpetuating the unending and mutually destructive cycle of retaliatory violence.

Jesus' blunt *"you've always heard it said, an eye for an eye, but instead I say to you,"* confronts us with a choice. We can choose to arm ourselves to the teeth, and resign ourselves to the futility of endless pitched battles. We can pluck out an eye for an eye till we're all completely blind. Or, we can look at the very same scenario and envision an alternate way of being. That alternate vision comprises the whole of Jesus' teaching, healing, and storytelling in parables.



In such an alternate vision, the right to defend one's self – blow for blow -- gives way to the command to love the last person on earth who deserves it. Only in this way, Jesus says and shows, is there at least the *possibility* the aggressor's hand can ultimately be stayed -- and the cycle of violence broken – if the heart can be turned, along with the other cheek.

Like a Ghandi, a King, a Mandela, and the other iconic saints of non-violent resistance to the brutal thugs, their reciprocal opponents, and the principalities and powers of our own time is anything but naïve, impractical or unrealistic. That's also why Jesus' message is regarded as both disarming and dangerous to our greatest fears and unceasing folly.

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## A GOSPEL OF DISARMAMENT

So, how much good news is really good for us? How much gospel can we afford?

Alternatively, one might ask if a gospel of non-violence is any more dangerous than the predominant message with which our world seems so utterly consumed? A blatant example is at the forefront of our current daily discourse.

This commentary began with two quotes; one more than two millennia old, the other a recent news item by an often-quoted voice in the heated debate over the issue of guns and violence in our civic life. But to the assertion that a good guy with a gun is the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun, one can point to a countless number of good guys that are dead as a doornail to refute such dangerous nonsense.

How then, one might reasonably ask, is a gospel of disarmament any less dangerous? Perhaps we might look to those monumental breakthroughs that were the results of those who taught, lived and died in a way that was certainly dangerous, but equally disarming. For it was just such exemplary lives that led millions to liberation, emancipation, a greater sense of justice, freedom and something more akin to what anyone would want to call true peace.

Most recently, the spokesperson who so vehemently advocates turning every household, school and street corner into an armed camp offered this hollow consolation: "There is not a law-abiding firearms owner across this United States," Mr. LaPierre said, "that wasn't torn to pieces by what happened in Sandy Hook."

Again, Mr. LaPierre was sadly mistaken. Those who were truly torn to pieces were the victims of gun violence in Newtown.

The gunslinger calls for arming ourselves with more, and more, and more weapons as the only way to settle our differences; in an unending showdown to tame our wild West. The unarmed sage of non-violence utterly refutes such blind absolutism.

Which is the more dangerous one?

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In the last thirty five years, John Bennison has been a teacher, preacher, carpenter, coffin builder, counselor, spiritual advisor, ethicist, writer and lyricist, musician and entertainer, assembly-line union worker, small business entrepreneur, corporate cog and executive director of a faith-based non-profit organization.

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