

***Perisson* as the Key to a New Theology of Peace**

In the Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "For I tell you if your righteousness does not *surpass* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 5:20), and "For if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers are you doing anything *out of the ordinary*? Do not even the gentiles do as much?" (Matt. 5:46–47).

The key to a new theology of peace is embracing the concept and practice of *perisson*. The gospels were written in koine Greek, an everyday, straightforward style of the Greek language. *Perisson* in Greek means "more." The disciples are called to do more than the tax collectors, to do more than the Pharisees, to do more than the gentiles. Jesus is saying that even tax collectors love their brothers, those who are within their circle of friendship, tribe, or family. That is a good, but it really is no big deal. Even the gentiles greet and embrace their brothers. That is a good but it really is not very exceptional. But my disciples, now they are really something. They are called to a much higher calling. They are called to love, greet, and embrace their so-called enemies. They are called to put themselves on the line in situations of conflict and enmity, communicate their love and regard for the enemy, remove the enmity, and make the enemy a friend. My disciples are called to go well beyond the ordinary, the minimum, the usual. They practice

perisson, a righteousness that goes well beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees. They are called to be active peacemakers. C. F. Andrews, the Anglican priest who was one of Mahatma Gandhi's closest friends, highlighted the idea of *perisson* as the key to understanding a new theology of peace in his book *The Sermon on the Mount*.⁴⁰

The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to the disciples of Jesus. It is their charter for how to live in the kingdom of God that Jesus has inaugurated. Jesus' call to discipleship was quite different from the call of a leading rabbi to his followers. Discipleship as Jesus understood it was not a call to a theoretical discipline but a call to action. According to John Meier, the Greek "verb, 'to follow' (*akoloutheo*) describes their activity in the gospels more than the verb 'to learn' (*manthano*). They were called literally to leave home and family to follow Jesus on his journeys, to share and be formed by Jesus' own prophetic ministry of proclaiming the kingdom.... Jesus' absolute demand of discipleship is unique in ancient scholastic traditions."⁴¹ Their work was not study but practice. Jesus was not for the disciples a teacher of correct doctrine but more a master-craftsman whom they were to learn from and imitate. Michael Hardin writes, "Discipleship was not matriculation into a Rabbinical college but apprenticeship to the work of the Kingdom."⁴²

The gospels are similar to ancient biographies that portray the chosen subject's character by narrating his words and deeds. Jesus' deeds and words follow a pattern of fidelity to God and selfless love toward other people. To follow in discipleship is to follow that same pattern. The gospels "insist on living according to the same pattern of life and death shown by Jesus," Volf writes.⁴³ The disciples are those who followed Jesus' way, back then, and it also refers to those who are trying to follow his way today. To practice "turning the other cheek"—not understood as acting as a doormat, but in its original meaning of creative, brave standing up to oppression—to practice love of enemies; to practice forgiveness seventy times seven times—these are directives for discipleship. They are also directives that form and found a theology of peacemaking.

The ethic of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is strikingly different from natural law behavior because it is rooted in God's love even for rebellious sinners. This belief in the God of Jesus, the one who takes the initiative toward enemies, pursuing them until they either change or harden their hearts, is the dynamism that energizes disciples to do *more* than the expected, *more* than what natural law thinking demands. As Perkins writes:

Ethical reflection in the New Testament has a style that is different from the "tell me the rules to get the reward model."

Jesus kept talking about what God intended his creation to be.... Many of his words are like these. They almost look like laws, but they only work for people who live out of a different consciousness than that of the Pharisees.⁴⁴

Many years ago Louis Monden, in his book *Sin, Liberty and Law*, reflected on what happens when all of ethical thinking concentrates on the line between what is right and what is wrong; what is moral and immoral; what is allowed and what is sin. Where do people live their lives? The answer—right at the line. This ethical thinking is concerned with keeping people safe. As long as people stay on the right side of the line they are safe. If they stay out of sin, if they don't cross the line, they are assured of heaven after this life. "Many even seem to hold implicitly, as a first principle, that God has no right to expect anything out of the ordinary from the ordinary person."⁴⁵

Monden was criticizing the moral theology of his time. After the Council of Trent, Catholic moral theology had as its purpose the training of priests to fulfill their roles in the confessional, emphasizing the lines between right and wrong in all kinds of settings, giving priests tools to be pastorally responsive and accurate judges of guilt—so they could assign penance according to the degree of severity of sin. The manuals of theology focused on the minimal requirements for salvation. The Tübingen school, on the other hand, which included such luminaries as Karl Adam and Romano Guardini, taught that moral theology should focus not just on sin, law, and penance but on the call of God in grace and the response to that call by Christians. It should focus on the fullness of the life to be lived by the Christian in the world and be based on a strong biblical foundation. Bernard Häring, recognized as the finest Catholic moral theologian of the twentieth century, took the teachings of the Tübingen school, synthesizing biblical and spiritual theology with moral theology, and produced his path-finding three-volume work on the *Law of Christ*. In that work he returned moral theology to being centered on Jesus' call to build the kingdom of God in the midst of a sinful, violent world.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites disciples to help build the kingdom of God in a sinful world by going beyond what is typically expected. It is an ethic of creative, courageous, proactive peacemaking. As Glen Stassen states, "The Sermon on the Mount gives us norms that are not legalistic prohibitions but grace-based practices, kingdom breakthroughs, transforming initiatives."⁴⁶ A focus on the fullness of the life to be lived by a Christian in the world will be a life of *perisson*, more. A life of *perisson* does not hover at the line between right and wrong, doing the minimum required to survive this life and get to heaven. Lives of *perisson*

push into the upper limits of human potential. Wink writes, "When people participate in nonviolent resistance they experience something of their higher selves; for nonviolence is a characteristic of the coming reign of God, and a foretaste of its transcendent reality."⁴⁷ They will be, with the support of a community of practice, extraordinary lives. As Christopher Marshall states:

Best thought of as new moral challenges not new laws, in response to the coming of the kingdom...new heights...because something unprecedented is breaking into history that changes everything, not impossible ideals but realistic goals because they are empowered by the new reality of God's redeeming power that has broken into the world.⁴⁸

A new theology of peace begins with the experience of a disciple who is called to embrace the way of Jesus, a way that confronts oppression using the tools of nonviolent resistance, a way that works to build a peaceful human condition well before calamitous violence has a chance to erupt. Such creative peacemaking is nourished through fellowship, prayer, and communal social action. Such a theology of peace will be quite different from one that is based on natural law thinking and its offshoot—the just war theory.

"The just war theory is the rule-based approach to the problem of violence," Lisa Sowle Cahill states.⁴⁹ Just war theory emerges from taking a natural law approach to the problem of war and violence. It reflects on humans as they are: their nature and what they need for flourishing. It then develops criteria that all people, using the light of their natural reason, can agree make sense when confronted with the decision about going to war. The criteria are developed with an eye to limiting war. It assumes that war is not a positive and to wage war is an exception to the rule of peaceful behavior that is humanity's natural condition. By stringently applying the criteria, such as just cause, proportionality, legitimate authority, and so on—responsible parties can make a judgment concerning the justifiability of a given war.

The just war theory has a place in a new theology of peace. It gives Christians a place to meet those who are not Christian disciples on a ground of common human reasoning. It is, however, a place that should be subordinate to the way of Christian discipleship. Jesus gives Christian disciples a way to act that goes way beyond what the dictates of human reason, unaided by the light of grace, will prescribe. It is a call to *perisson*, that is, a call to *more*. The New Testament teaching on love of enemy and creative nonviolence calls Christian disciples to not wait until a decision about waging war is nigh. It calls disciples to be active peacemakers. Active peacemaking means working as Jesus did—he

worked to build a society that would reject violence as a solution to oppression, and he hoped thereby to avoid calamitous violence. He worked to build an inclusive society that avoided labeling people as enemies. He modeled and taught a better way to resolve conflicts—a way of nonviolent, creative action, “turning the other cheek,” and active love of enemy. He worked to build a jubilee society, where the poor and the powerless would benefit from equitable distribution of the earth’s bounty. He brought the kingdom of God into our midst and called disciples to make the kingdom a full reality.

A new theology of peace will give pride of place to this New Testament teaching, to Christian discipleship and the call to be proactive peacemakers. The Catholic position on war and violence will no longer be equated with the just war theory. The Catholic position will embrace a much bigger call, a call to *perisson*, a call to *more*.