

TUMC – 28 July, 2013

Jesus call us to deny ourselves and to pick up our toothbrush

I was brought up to think that good girls don't go against the rules and definitely don't get arrested. I think the theory was that in order to be salt and light one did not do anything that might lead to such consequences as being put into jail. My training and work with CPT has brought me to thinking differently about this. In many countries, including our own there are rules and laws that are unjust. When one speaks up against these laws, sometimes one can be arrested and put into prison. And sometimes the authorities listen.

. During my CPT training in 2011 4 people were arrested as they sat on the floor of the shop and prayed. The rest of us were demonstrating in front of the Body Shop in Chicago as we brought awareness of the plight of farmers in Colombia. They were being evicted from their land in order for a large company to plant oil palms. BS used the palm oil in their products. In this instance both the court and BS listened. In court the 4 were given a chance to speak out. The judge quoted a Biblical

passage from the prophets and dismissed the case. . Soon afterward BS ended their contract with the large company.

Franz Muller, a youth worker in former East Germany wrote a German children's song telling the story of Jonny, young Black activist in southern USA. The young man was following the call of Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle against the oppression of African American people. The song tells of King instructing young people to carry a toothbrush with them as they went into the demonstrations and marches. This object would not be taken from them by the authorities if they were arrested and jailed. The toothbrush became a symbol that they were willing to take this step, to put their lives on the line in the struggle for freedom and dignity. This song became a well-loved cry of the youth and young adults of the Republic of Germany during their resistance against the totalitarian oppression forced upon them.

Martin Luther King's call to activists was based on what he saw as the Biblical foundation for non-violent struggle. His upbringing in a Black

church community as well as further theological study taught him that God has made all human beings equal. He heard God calling his people to object non-violently to oppression until the shalom: wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, fullness, rest, harmony, and the absence of discord, that God desired for all people was restored. He saw nonviolent activism as doing something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them a new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.

However, activism in a nonviolent way is not easy. John Dear, a Jesuit priest who works to promote Christian nonviolence has said “nonviolence is the willingness to *suffer* in the struggle for justice and peace *without inflicting suffering on others* or giving up the truth of justice and peace”.

In the Bible we see evidence of God's call for justice for all. We are told stories of men and women who were prepared to put their comfort and lives on the line to resist evil when God's call was not being upheld.

One story that I love is that of two courageous women in Exodus 1. The Pharaoh feared an uprising from the burgeoning population of Hebrew slaves. He gave a directive to the Hebrew midwives to kill every boy at birth. Shiprah and Puah knew Yahweh wanted life, not death. So despite the fact that they were putting their own lives into jeopardy they did a subversive act. They did not kill the babies, and then lied to the Pharaoh. Many boy babies lived due to their courage and God blessed their families.

Today we heard from Psalms 72. This scripture describes what God expects of a ruler or someone in authority. Included in the list is: judging with righteousness and justice; defending the cause of the poor; delivery of the poor, needy and those without a helper; pity for the weak and needy and finally the redemption of such people from oppression and violence. A leader who treats the ones under him in this way will be remembered and the land will prosper.

However, we see throughout the Bible that the subsequent rulers

continued to disregard God's guidance. The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had the task of calling the community to accountability and responsibility in their relationship to God. This calling included their relationship to each other as well the people around them. The Israelites are told again and again that God does not want their sacrifices and praise as long as they are treating the people around them in unjust ways.

Unfortunately, even today we often find rulers and governments not following the way that God wants. People are oppressed due to racism, classism, sexism and a lack of care regarding how our abuse of the environment affects poorer parts of the world. **Should it not be our obligation as God-followers/ shalom makers to hold the authorities accountable, to remind them of the way God has called them to treat those in need of protection.**

Christian Peacemaker Teams has teams in four regions of the world:

Palestine, Colombia, the Kurdish part of Iraq (where I work 4 ½ months per year) and the Aboriginal Justice Team in Canada. We walk

alongside the people in these regions who are living non-violently to oppose and change the violence and oppression around them

For 62 days in spring of 2011 1000's of residents of the Sulaimnai region of Iraqi Kurdistan took to the public square to tell their government that they were tired of corruption and oppression and that they wanted change. On the last day, April 19, the government showed what they thought of that idea, by coming into Azadi Square with tear gas and live gunfire. A Muslim cleric, Mullah Kameron told our CPT team his story of standing and opposing those with power.

For those of the Muslim faith Friday is the day of worship. The leaders of the mosques in the city center embraced this non-violent resistance and decided to take the time of prayer to the square. Thousands of people brought their prayer mats to the asphalt and prayed for peace for their region. Early on in the 62 days Mullah Kameron brought the message for the day. In it he called for a revolution without violence—a “jihad of peace..” He urged the armed militias to put down their guns. He appealed to the demonstrators to see the soldiers as their brothers and

not throw rocks or hurt them. He said, “The Jihad” I am speaking about is not a violent struggle or a struggle of believers against non-believers, but the nonviolent struggle of truth and justice against corruption and injustice.”

“But the authorities took my words and twisted them to use against me.

“They picked out the word, ‘jihad,’ and made it look like I was advocating for violence. Government leaders threatened me. Anti-terrorist forces came to my house, put a mask on my head and charged me under the antiterrorism law, which could have brought the death penalty”. Many advocates, including Christian Peacemaker Teams helped put pressure on authorities for his release. After they finally listened to his whole recorded speech , in which it was clear he was calling for a peaceful struggle, he was fined and released.

Mulah Kameron told us, “There’s a passage in the Holy Koran that says if you see those in power oppress the poor, but you remain silent and don’t do something about it, you are standing with the powerful,” he said. “Islam teaches us that there is no justice without freedom and

freedom brings justice. “As he spoke to our team he played with his four children. He did not have harsh things to say about the authorities who imprisoned him. He was determined to continue speaking the truth and helping the people in his community to communicate with each other and to their government.

.In Jeremiah 20:7-10 we hear the voice of prophet Jeremiah. He is crying out his fear and exhaustion with having to deal with insult, reproach and even threat to his life as a result of the words he has said to the authorities.

*Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him." (Jer 20:7-10).*



. It reminds me another story, one from our friend and translator,  
Mohammed Mahdi.

If you would take a posterboard sign and stand on the street corner here in Winnipeg you would probably be ignored or at the most asked to move on. In Iraqi Kurdistan the situation is different. This kind of activity is quite unusual and when you do it you attract attention- sometimes positive and often potentially negative. The Kurdish media is hungry for news and grabs onto everything they can find. Even one man in protest can create a story that goes across the region by nightfall.

An activist friend of CPT Iraqi Kurdistan once said, “Kurdish families are very connected, but also everyone knows everyone in Kurdistan. When you become an activist you have to be concerned not only about your blood connections but you have to be concerned about 10,000 people who know about you and hear everything you say and watch everything you do.

Muhammed met CPT in 2006.. Gradually he added to his job description- driver, translator, advisor, friend and activist. The team began to appreciate more and more his ideas and wisdom.

One morning, Muhammed came to the CPT house with a plan. This was the day that the new prime minister of Kurdish Regional Government visited the opposition party in our city, Silaimani. When Muhammed heard of this visit he decided this was the day for him to become a lone activist without the safety net of saying he was working for CPT. He knew the eyes of the region would be upon him. He hoped that PM Barzanni would see his lone figure through the tinted glass and think for a moment. His hand written banner was very simple. It read, “Don’t be afraid of reform. Start with yourself. Make history for yourself.”

Muhammed drove his truck out to the gates of Gorran hill. He stood by himself and held the sign for all to see. But he was right, 10,000 eyes **were** watching. The television media spent more time on his story than Barzani’s visit. Photos and written releases were on many of the Kurdish

internet news sites. Muhammed's family was not very happy with his decision to become part of the limelight. Why did it have to be him to do this action? Why would he put himself into the eye of the government? Did he not remember that such activity can be very dangerous in this society? People from across the region phoned to say they had seen him. Some of these were congratulatory, others wondered of his sanity.

Why do I tell you these stories:

1. Because I promised them that I would. They feel very isolated as Kurds and sometimes feel that no one knows they exist.
2. I want you to remember God's desire for peace and freedom and shalom in the world. Matthew 5 tells us to be salt and light. We, as God followers/shalom makers are the ones being called to step out. Salt makes its presence known by awakening up the taste buds. . There is not hiding under a basket with salt. The same with light. Light makes things clear. It gives people a chance see what is going on and thus a way forward toward change for the good.

3. I want you to think of and remember the privilege we have to live in a place where our lives are not at risk when we speak the truth of God's shalom to the powers and authorities.

A few years back many Christians were wearing bracelets with the letters WWJD on them. Today I ask you to think to about *What would Jesus do?* in the face of oppression, whether it be that of the poor, people of colour, women, or people of the LGBT community who live around us.

The translated final words of the song that I mentioned earlier are-“So like Jonny you have many injustices to confront. Follow the example of little Jonny and don't get too comfortable in your life. Do you have your toothbrush with you? You will still need it. A lot of people who are against injustice are still being locked up”.

I don't suppose that many of you will ever end up in prison as a result of calling authorities to justice. However, , we still hear the voice of Jesus say we are not to have fear as we take up our cross daily and follow him

in our work to bring God's shalom to everyone. In Matthew 16 Jesus calls the people who follow him to “ deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. For those who want to save their lives will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” He might very well have been telling us to pick up our toothbrush.