

January 22, Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23

by [T. Denise Anderson](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

I serve on a team dedicated to creating spaces for innovation in the church and sparking imagination in ministry. In our gatherings we receive training designed to help strengthen our competencies and expand our knowledge base for ministry. In my opinion, the most impactful training we've had was on nonviolent communication.

NVC begins with the assumption that all people are “compassionate by nature, and that violent strategies—verbal or physical—are learned behaviors taught and supported by the prevailing culture.” NVC invites its practitioners first to consider another’s humanity when communicating with them. It challenges us not to be guarded against others when entering into disagreements with them, and reminds us that the person in front of us is just that: a person, a whole person with fears, hopes, and anxieties of his or her own who may be communicating out of those fears and anxieties. Instead of responding out of our own fears and anxieties, we are to hold the other person in our hearts as a fellow human being deserving of compassion.

The prevailing culture teaches us to use “enemy images” when we encounter those who have perspectives, practices, and beliefs that are different from our own. But enemy images, says Marshall Rosenberg, come from “the thinking that says there is something wrong with the people whose actions and values we don’t agree with.” Whether they are antagonistic toward us or not, we decide that their worldview is a threat. Their practices are threatening, they mean us no good, and they’re undoing all the work we’re trying to do. The gun owner is antagonistic to the antigun community activist. The Muslim refugee is a danger to the evangelical citizen. The Democrat is anathema to the Republican. Because they are different, something is wrong with them.

When we see people using enemy images, we're creating them in our own image. We're defining them according to our understanding of them, and our understanding is not favorable. Yes, real enemies exist. But it's too easy to label others as enemies. The other person becomes an enemy without ever uttering a word or raising a fist. All they need to do is present an opposing view or an alternate way of life.

Jesus shows us another way. After his cousin John is arrested and awaits his execution, Jesus starts to show urgency in his ministry. He leaves to go to Galilee, then to Capernaum. He proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

I'm always struck by the first part: "Repent." It's not just a command but also an invitation. It beckons the hearer to turn away from a course of action and choose a new (and better) way. The call to repent is powerful. It suggests that no one is beyond the reach of redemption, and that we all—*all*—can choose a different path. If we were once the enemy, we need not remain the enemy.

We strive not against people but against spiritual forces.

When Jesus meets Simon and Andrew, two career fishermen, he calls them to be fishers *of* men (or people). I am reminded that at all turns it is people who are the goal. It is people whom God prizes. It is people whom God pursues. Though humans may write them off as enemies because of their behavior, their opinions, or their practices, God sees them as redeemable.

Political climates around the world are as challenging and menacing as they've ever been. The Christian is obligated to stand against and call out evil in all its manifestations: bigotry, oppression, and greed. And yet we hold in tension our simultaneous charge to call in all who practice these things. The crux of the gospel is not just that the kingdom of God has come near, but that we're called to repent. We cannot seek God's kingdom without seeking all people to participate in it.

Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that we do not strive against people but against spiritual forces that have a hold on people and are embraced by people. These forces are not synonymous with people, who can be redeemed. Our goal is to separate the antagonist from the antagonism. We see repentance and redemption for the bigoted sinner, the ignorant sinner, and the privileged sinner.

When we neglect to fight for them, we are fighting only for ideologies. Ideologies should serve people, not the other way around. Our fight should be for the good of people, and we cannot let ourselves be jaded. We fight for what's right, not to *be* right. When we fight for what's right, we already *are* right.

As the realization of Christ's presence in the world grows in this Epiphany season, so will the reach of Christ's voice. May we stand ready to embrace all who respond to a call to repent, and remove the clothes of enemy once and for all.