

## WHAT WOULD GANDHI DO?

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We all seem comfortable here at Community Church on this unseasonably warm October morning. Yet when we leave we may be worried about more than global warming. On the street you'll find panhandlers—homeless people, many with medical or drug issues. You may worry about your own bills. You may worry about your children or grandchildren— how long their Daddy's or Mommy's work will last, whether they may be deported, whether they will go into the military, whether they might kill or be killed. World conditions are getting worse—we are faced with an ever more corporatized economy and government, with unwanted surveillance, with inability to get justice. We are faced with calamities from war or terror, from a growing climate crisis, from a possible nuclear holocaust triggered by a crazy president. There seems to be no effective opposition to the institutions and leaders who allow or encourage conditions for these terrors. God help us! "What would Jesus do?"

Well, with a pretty much secular congregation like ourselves here today, we're more likely to ask "What would *Gandhi* do?"—Mahatma Gandhi, a "saint" who helped to free a nation of 400 million people from the rule of the well-armed, indomitable British Empire only 80 years ago. Indeed John Haynes Holmes, the founding minister of Community Church of New York, told his congregation a few years earlier that Gandhi was "*the suffering Christ of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.*"

So that's what I'd like to talk about today. How Gandhian principles and methods might be applied across space and time to the United States today, and how we might go beyond.

First we must recognize that when the best-selling Indian writer Arundhati Roy referred to Gandhi as a saint, it was with tongue in cheek in the context of her admiration for Gandhi's *Dalit* (Untouchable) rival Dr. B. P. Ambedkar—who became Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, and First Minister of Law & Justice in independent India. He saw Gandhi as a patronizing, if maverick, member of a privileged caste. Gandhi was born into the merchant, farmer & craftsman tier of the caste system, some of whose members now comprise the majority of India's billionaires. His father was chief adviser to the maharaja of the princely state of Porbandar in the region of Gujarat in coastal western India. Bucking tradition, young Gandhi studied law in London, settled for twenty years among Indian families in South Africa, and led them in non-violent resistance to the discriminatory British regime there. He returned to India at age 46 when Colonial Secretary Smuts in South Africa had had enough of Gandhi's community's demands for equality.

Charismatic and devoted to Hindu, Christian, and Muslim moral principles in his pursuit of political betterment, Gandhi became recognized as *Mahatma* (Great Soul). Many in the United States remember him as a saint. In more recent times the producer-director Richard Attenborough made a spectacular biographical film called "Gandhi" which some of you may have seen. Attenborough was cautioned by Gandhi's close friend and first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who said: "*Whatever you do, do not deify him—that is what we have done in India—and he was too great a MAN to be deified.*"

Historically, both Jesus and Gandhi were revered more for their faith than for the consequences of their missions. For all his suffering and his gospel of love, the later generations of Jesus' followers were responsible for system-wide violence: the Roman Emperor Constantine's adoption of The Cross as a symbol for his legions; the bloody anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish Crusades at the beginning of the second

millennium; the bone-breaking Holy Inquisition; the Spanish and Portuguese Conquest of millions in the New World; the genocide of the tribal people of North America started by New England Puritans; the rise of fundamentally violent capitalism in Protestant countries---police, courts, and prisons in defense of lending at interest, exploitation of public lands, slave-owning, and so on; and the fanaticism of present day Christian fundamentalists with their links to the military. So Jesus' message of love was largely ignored by future leaders.

As for Gandhi with his insistence on Truth and Nonviolence, his victory in 1944 over the oppressive British Raj immediately gave way to splitting off of Pakistan from India against his wishes, resulting in mass migrations of marginalized people heading for safety in the newly defined country of their religious cohorts—to India for Hindus and Sikhs living in what had just become Pakistan, and to Pakistan or East Pakistan for Muslims long resident in basically Hindu India. Millions of migrants were bashed, raped, and killed in the process by angry and inhospitable natives of those areas. Gandhi was appalled, and spent weeks in particularly violent areas like Bengal, protesting through fasting and trying to bring peace. A couple of years after partition and Indian independence Gandhi often quoted the Koran as well as Hindu scriptures at worship services. This interweaving of holy texts in appreciation of what different peoples have in common cost him his life. He was shot dead by an educated member of the RSS—the organization espousing *Hindutva*, the creed of Hindu exclusiveness for India.

The RSS flourishes even today, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP party---an RSS spin-off. Modi had been governor of Gujarat state, and looked the other way when thousands of Muslims were raped and murdered in a revenge pogrom by Hindus enraged by an unexplained incineration of Hindu travelers in a railroad car. Modi continues today to speak in terms of moderation but ignores extremism when it comes from Hindus. India and Pakistan have repeatedly been at war, with war constantly raging in Kashmir in the north, and Kashmiri independence seekers a third force.

Like Jesus, Gandhi's way of non-violence seemed largely limited in history. Nevertheless, there have also been successes as with Martin Luther King's winning of civil rights in the U.S. With the weakening of colonial powers, many African independence leaders including Nelson Mandela were influenced by Gandhi's message of nonviolence, but tolerated violent allies or actually turned to violence themselves. Gandhi would be chagrined.

Martin Luther King called the principle of nonviolent resistance the "*guiding light of our movement. Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method.*" But Gandhi's method was complex. He called it *satyagraha* where *satya* means truth and *agraha* means force (or literally, holding fast)—thus "holding fast to truth," or *truth force*. Gandhi admitted that what he meant by "truth" could vary from time to time, from situation to situation. But these variations would be confined to a combination of four fundamental aims found in Sanskrit documents appearing even before the Hindu priesthood with its caste hierarchy system arose some 2000 years ago: *dharma* (ethics), *artha* (political and economic power), *kama* (pleasure), and *moksha* (spiritual liberation). So *satya* or Truth would be a balance among or integration of these aims. Today in India, and perhaps even more in major Western establishments, it seems *artha* is tops—economic and political power—with *kama* a perverted pleasure principle within them---as an insatiable desire for riches and new modes of control. *Moksha* in Hindu India would be spiritual liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, or in the West would be an aim for Heaven accomplished by *rapture* for Christian fundamentalists, or by succeeding in *business* for Presbyterians and related Protestants, or by *righteous living* which for many US Jews includes undying support for Israel as the Promised Land.

Okay, now that we've had a look at the second, third, and fourth basic aims which make up Truth for Gandhi, let's zoom in on the first---*Dharma*, or ethical duty---the prime aim for Gandhi personally. To make sure these ethical duties would be known to all leaders, he published his "Seven Social Sins" in 1925 in his English-language newspaper *Young India*. Each is an ethical mandate—seven of them—and I want to add an eighth which I believe is critical for breaking through the cultural and political boundaries that frustrate us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. That added sin is "Power without Empathy." But first, let me name the seven listed by Gandhi. He stated each in the negative "without" form as a sin, to be avoided, but I will review them in their inverse, positive way:

1. *Wealth must presume Work*. Gandhi may have had in mind the wasting Idle Rich, and conversely the spiritual enrichment of folks through the work, for example, of spinning and weaving for necessary clothing. We can expand on that.
2. *Politics must presume Principle*. Too much politics is opportunistic and pragmatic. There's an Indian saying "Indians don't cast Votes; they vote Caste."
3. *Commerce must presume Morality*. No more monopolizing, holding alternatives off the market, price gouging, deceptive advertising, et cetera.
4. *Science must presume Humanity*. Working for Monsanto to invent seeds for profit, or earth-destroying fertilizers, is evil. Better to promote inventions which help communities.
5. *Knowledge must have Character*. For example, facts should be rounded out to relate to other facts or truths for meaning. Don't be afraid of theories like evolution or democracy; try to be clear and inclusive.
6. *Pleasure must not violate Conscience*. Sex can be dangerous or humiliating. Speed can kill. Heating with oil can boost global warming and its dire consequences. You can expand on this.
7. *Worship must presume Sacrifice*. The Hebrew prophet Micah urged people not to donate money (like gold or livestock), but to "do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

And now let's add Number 8. *Power should presume Empathy*. When you exercise power of any kind---know what typical beneficiaries or victims think or feel. How onlookers or unwary children or foreigners think and feel. This is critical in the larger picture. We'll explore this as we approach our conclusion.

So what would Gandhi do if he faced today's huge problems in America? Looking at his ethical principles we can guess HOW he would engage a problem. But WHICH problems would he choose to focus on? That is a matter not of ethics but of strategy. If Truth is his aim he would not pick some particular false tweet-de-jour of Trump, or some new law, because Gandhi's "truth" is much more complicated. Actually this might lead a Gandhi today to consider TV news and the corporate-dominated media and public relations industries as a target for *satyagraha*, since those media prepare the public for wars and other arbitrary official actions and justify much exploitive corporate action in the world.

If we're serious about Gandhi's leadership in confronting major social problems, let's turn for a few minutes to his emblematic *Salt Satyagraha*, or Salt March which shook the world in 1930. Here the aim was clear: getting Britain to "quit India"---to withdraw its army, its favored corporations, and its administrators, and accept India's national independence. Though there were many "pressure points" on the British Raj, Gandhi's target was this single coherent institution. Gandhi chose one critical branch

of the Raj—the Salt Monopoly—as his target. This is no small matter since India is the third largest producer of salt in the world, and salt has been a cultural standard there for millennia. It is made by evaporation of sea water, naturally iodized. Why choose the Salt Monopoly as his target? Because the Raj by fiat exclusively manufactured all salt used in India, and collected a tax on all salt sales. Salt was necessary in every Indian's diet, and the tax was clearly burdensome especially on India's hundreds of millions of poor people. That tax provided a substantial 8 percent of the colonial government's revenue. Masses of Indians would respond to a call to protest and even boycott government salt. So taking over the monopoly, commandeering its stocks of salt, or making their own salt was Gandhi's objective. Such action could serve as a bargaining chip for government concessions not only on taxation, but also for further steps toward independence. Here's what happened:

The main features of the Salt March were two related actions taking place during ten weeks from mid-March to late-May, 1930. The first action was hiking 240 miles from Gandhi's *ashram* (intentional community) near Ahmedabad to the shore of the Arabian Sea in the western state of Gujarat. The 24-day march was a feature of the Congress Party's developing civil disobedience movement, and was publicized so that thousands of townsfolk and volunteer marchers celebrated Gandhi and his committed group of *satyagrahis* at every stop along the way. The March was carefully planned and orchestrated by Gandhi's staff, who scouted the route so as to assure big turnouts at every village where it was likely that the colonial mayor would resign, and where journalists could conveniently cover progress of the march, and spread the word. Before speaking, Gandhi would size up the particular concerns of each village.

Upon reaching the seashore, before a huge crowd and the international press, Gandhi scooped up a lump of salt from one of the lot-sized salt pans, some of which authorities had trampled into the mud, boiled it dry, and auctioned off the resulting salt, tax free. Reports exploded, and sympathetic actions were taken by movement groups in other parts of India. Millions were encouraged and broke oppressive laws. They made salt, they quit offices, they bought homespun instead of cloth imported from the mills of Lancashire. 80,000 were arrested. A few days later Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy that his Congress group would act nonviolently to take quantities of salt from a government wholesale depot at nearby Dharasana unless repeal of the salt tax and several other demands were met. That night Gandhi was arrested and jailed for what turned out to be 8 months, but Congress decided to go ahead with the Dharasana action anyway.

With Gandhi in jail, groups among more than 2,000 well-trained satyagrahis were led by the celebrated woman poet Sarojini Naidu in waves of unarmed marches on the salt-depot property. Each wave was met by dozens of British-commanded Indian police, armed with *lathis*—steel-tipped bamboo rods. Periodically over a period of several days marchers advanced and were mercilessly beaten. As planned, none resisted the blows. Many of the wounded, some with cracked skulls, were taken to a hospital. Four died. Each day United Press correspondent Webb Miller telegraphed eye-witness stories counting 320 men and women downed, some “beaten to a bloody pulp”. Stories appeared in major dailies and magazines around the world. Readers were horrified at the brutality. Governments were petitioned. British officialdom was weakened by criticism from their own people.

After the Salt Satyagraha, massive acts of defiance increased all over India—illegally making salt, quitting offices, boycotts, and so on. However, overt resistance waned over succeeding months as Gandhi sat reading in jail. He was finally released from jail to go to London and attend the Second Round Table on the future of India—where actually none of Gandhi's objectives were effectively dealt with. However, scores-of-millions of Indians had been convinced that resistance to the Empire was right and were

willing to risk punishment. Nevertheless, the salt tax continued for 15 years until Nehru headed the transitional Government in 1946, ending the tax that had benefited only the foreign rulers of the colony. By that time Britain's World War II efforts had exhausted India's resources of fighting men, millions had starved in Bengal since Prime Minister Churchill had taken all their wheat, and Britain was ready to quit India.

So, was the Salt Satyagraha a triumph or a tragedy? I'd say both. Objectively it was tragic that four good people died and many more were wounded. Objectively it was tragic—or pathetic—that the salt tax was not rescinded as long as the British remained, nor did the Viceroy agree to any substantial reform. Subjectively, however, marchers at Dharasana proved that they were able to do their duty—*dharma*—and Gandhi was proud even to remain in jail—his *dharma*—for 8 months, and was then released to represent the Congress Party at an official international conference in London.

The Salt Satyagraha was a triumph in that it showed the world a new organizational tool for middle-term social change: disciplined, militant nonviolence used against systemic abuse. Nonviolent tactics echoed throughout India for months afterward. This realization echoed down through the decades in Africa where leaders such as Lumumba and Mandela succeeded with non-violence where violence had failed, and in the United States where Martin Luther King and his following used nonviolent resistance to gain civil rights for systemically abused minorities and everybody.

Gandhi's organized nonviolence became a legitimate and favored strategy not just in India through the Congress Party, which dominated politics before Independence and for decades afterwards. It became recognized among intellectuals and has been analyzed by academic disciplines to scientifically establish its efficacy. Sociologist Gene Sharp, who lives in East Boston, who founded the Albert Einstein Institution on nonviolent struggle and whose executive director Jamila Raqib recently spoke in this Church, has devoted his career to research and selective promotion of nonviolent strategies—for example in Thailand, Serbia, and Ukraine—emphasizing the practical rather than the ideological use of organized nonviolence. Picking up on this matter, sociologists Erika Chenoweth & Maria Stephan studied all significant social change movements in the last 100 years and found that half of the nonviolent movements succeeded while only one-quarter of the violent movements did—a strong practical endorsement of nonviolence.

But the other half of the nonviolent movements failed—against armed regimes. In some direct confrontations some nonviolent resisters will die; in others none will die; but in armed confrontations far more of the resisters will die. Fear of death is powerful, but at Dharasana Gandhi had spiritually and socially prepared the resisters to die if necessary, wanting just to do the right thing, and to do it assertively.

But what if the armed police there had had a change of heart, stopped the beatings, and perhaps mutinied? Gandhi hoped and even expected the adversaries' hearts to melt when confronted with unarmed, non-resisting challengers, but those hearts didn't melt, did they? These police had no empathy for the challenger, and the challenger had no empathy for the police—at least for the particular policeman who was beating him or her. How could they, without conversation or even mute play-acting? Without knowing the Other, personally, even for five minutes. Knowing what's first in his mind, knowing how he feels in the situation—beyond “sympathy”. Empathy seeks the feeling inside.

It's curious, Gandhi had great sympathy for oppressed people in the mass, but have you ever seen a photograph of him looking into the eyes of an oppressed person? Yes, there's a famous photo of Gandhi

and Nehru, old friends, looking at each other as they talked. And in Attenborough's movie Gandhi and his wife Kasturba looked into each other's faces as they tried not to argue—but that was only a movie. In his early years, when he was in jail in South Africa following the Zulu rebellions, Gandhi perceived his black jail-mates superficially, more or less as loathsome animals, and petitioned the colonial government for separate jail cells for Indians. What kind of communication might they have had? He never quite got over his racism—back in India he had little regard for the travail of the Adivasi—the 30 million indigenous people, many of whom in their desperation have now embraced Maoist communism.

Although he had never lived in a village without an ashram, Gandhi importantly had a Constructive Programme which idealized village life reformed to eliminate caste hierarchy and untouchability. But this didn't accommodate urbanism and modernism sought by millions of social builders, reflected in today's high-tech juggernaut in India. Critically, despite some Muslims in the post-colonial ruling Congress Party, Gandhi didn't leave a strong social movement for Hindu-Muslim political unity. His ashrams—training grounds for satyagraha and a future India--- included few Muslim residents. He was friends with the Pashtun Muslim northern resistance leader Ghaffar Khan, known as the "Frontier Gandhi", but fatally failed to include him in any joint social movement with a future.

Allow me to introduce a bit of psychology. The Trinidadian writer V S Naipaul, himself of Hindu background, notes that Hindu men tend to be introverted, to think and feel only of themselves, and of the system—the caste or family system and how it affects them—and rarely think or feel *interpersonally*. He attributes this to ancient Hindu values, many of which gave rise to the trans-social tradition of Buddhism; values which were strong in Gandhi—though Gandhi wanted to reform the added priestly caste hierarchy. So when we wonder what Gandhi might do were he alive in the United States today, we may wonder how Americans may have the advantage of their varied interpersonal experience—their possibilities for empathy, for knowing how others feel, and feeling it enough themselves to overcome prejudices.

In an important speech last month at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Bernie Sanders emphasized this tendency. He said:

*"...I was mayor of the city of Burlington, Vermont, in the 1980's, when the Soviet Union was our enemy. We established a sister city program with the Russian city of Yaroslavl, a program which still exists today. I will never forget seeing Russian boys and girls visiting Vermont, getting to know American kids, and becoming good friends. Hatred and wars are often based on fear and ignorance. The way to defeat this ignorance and diminish this fear is through meeting with others and understanding the way they see the world. Good foreign policy means building people-to-people relationships.*

*"We should welcome young people from all over the world and all walks of life to spend time with our kids in American classrooms, while our kids, from all income levels, do the same abroad..."*

Can such a program have enduring effects on whole populations? An amazing example is the harmony and generativity of Muslims, Christians, and Jews living together in what is now Spain and Portugal during three or four hundred years of the Middle Ages. They enjoyed and promoted the arts and sciences, enriching themselves, and by their translating ancient and contemporary works into Latin, helped to civilize other Europeans as well. They called that age "*the Convivencia*"—living with each other. It came to an end with the Crusades and the Christian kings and queens wishing to conquer their own populations as well as the Muslim societies of Spain and the East, and the Jews of Europe.

I want to stress the importance of empathy. So what can promote and support empathy? The potential for empathy needs a space for interpersonal knowledge and feeling to develop—to develop between

people who don't really know one another, and who probably harbor identity stereotypes and notions about such persons' likely helpful or harmful behavior. That space can be "the street" as they say of Arab populations, or a "forum"—which traces back to the Roman forum or Athenian agora, which were literally open spaces, plazas, where all kinds of people frequently gather for shopping, entertainment, celebration, conversation, and sometimes group decision-making. Bernie's exchange students got to know one another in schools, living rooms, church basements, playing fields, and through exchanging pictures and comment on the internet. In Brazil and Brooklyn and elsewhere different kinds of folks have come together at special forums called "Participatory Budgeting" conferences where, with preparation in groups and in dialog, large assemblies talk about neighborhood needs and come up with specific works-projects to be voted upon, and funded from the city treasury. All these spaces we can call The Commons.

In schools, and perhaps after school, kids can learn how to approach others, sensitively ask provocative questions, and come to understand what dominates the other's thinking at the moment, the hurts and hopes that they can relate to. They can learn to start and play games which do more than exercise and entertain. They can become acquainted with friends and family of those with whom they do things. So public school is an important Common. Facebook and Twitter look like commons, but anything there that resembles conversation can be twisted or even faked by egoists and corporations bent on having things their way, and by cynical or hostile groups bent on expanding militias and on promoting racial and ethnic cleansing, for instance. We must check face-to-face with friends and with a wide spectrum of information sources.

So in conclusion, we can say that while Jesus would approach persons with *agape*—Godly love, paternal love—Gandhi would approach the *problem* rather than the individual person. Both modeled nonviolence, but that is a method, not an aim like Democracy. Gandhi's "love" would be for the principle of Truth—embodying duty to ensure well-being of others, but more in a legalistic or religious sense than personal. Gandhi's strategy—his selection of systemic features to be changed—was peculiar to his place and time, and he left us no principle for choosing among today's problems outside of colonialism. Corporatism is like colonialism, but it is diffuse, and not a coherent target like the British Raj.

Both Jesus and Gandhi would promote ethical behavior in all situations, assuring honesty and devotion. What seemed to be lacking in Gandhi, unlike Jesus, was seeking out personal feelings and stories from the mouth of this or that oppressed person. Gandhi's rule was a "one principle fits all", centered on his own fasting and other personal sacrifice. This falls short even of troublesome "majority rule", which itself falls far short of true democracy where most people accommodate the welfare of most other people in terms of the sources of their feelings—an "empathy rule".

Gandhi was a purist. He stoically stuck to an almost religious personal principle of nonviolence and sacrifice at the expense of reciprocity with common folk. He was ambivalent about the caste system and did not bring about cultural revolution. World War II eventually exhausted British rule in India.

The systemic solution? To me it makes more sense to aim to *enlarge The Commons* so as to promote positive activity between persons pair-wise, and among diverse groups; to begin to feel what others feel; to find ways—small and large—for living together. We must strive for every person to take initiatives, for others to peacefully respond, to organize ourselves as common folk for universal good.

Thank you.