

# Religion Teacher Update

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THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RELIGIONS AND ETHICS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## Teaching with the Bible

### Come, Have Breakfast

by Jim McGarry

The Gospel passages used across a spectrum of Christian Churches after the celebration of Easter seek to help the faithful interpret the meaning of that central belief—the Resurrection.

It is a conundrum. Jesus appears to his disciples several times and they simply do not recognize him. He walks the road to the town of Emmaus, away from Jerusalem, with those returning after the Passover festivities. (Lk 24:13-35) He chats with them, seems to demystify events a bit, lifts their spirits significantly. They are so grateful they invite him to dinner. During all this, he is simply an intriguing stranger, startlingly literate with the scriptures. Kitschy Christian art has him hiding beneath a cowl, like a student skulking in a hooded sweatshirt. There is no scriptural evidence for this. He's out there among them, forehead, cheekbones, jowl and all. They do not recognize him.

Until the breaking of the bread.

After this meal, Jesus heads over to some of his inner circle still in Jerusalem, though not as quickly as two of the folks from Emmaus who are in the midst of their recounting of events when Jesus shows up, hungry again! (Lk 24:36-49) The disciples think they are seeing a ghost and are described as still “incredulous” after Jesus shows the wounds in his hands and feet. They still don't recognize him. So then Jesus says “Have you anything to eat?” I like to call this the “Got milk?” passage, for in a way analogous to drinking that creamy white liquid in the famous ad for the dairy industry, eating is Jesus' resurrection signature: his appetite and his relation to food are the lynch pin to understanding the resurrection. He is known in the breaking of the bread, and then in this passage, the eating of baked fish.

A third scene is my personal favorite, at least partly because this time Jesus is the host and provides the repast, or at least some of it. (Jn: 21:1-14; this is really the origin story for potlucks.) Here again, the inner circle, this time seven of

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### The Beatitudes and Social Justice Today

by Kelly Gillespie

Teaching sixteen-year-old young women about Christology in a Catholic school can be a struggle. Even those not raised in the faith have been surrounded by references to Jesus or to Christ for most of their lives. I am always conscious of the challenge of asking my students to step away from what they think they already know about Jesus' teachings. Thus, one of my primary goals in sophomore religion is to help them translate the messages of the Gospels to a modern context in order to evaluate their potential impact on the world today.

Teaching the Beatitudes, as recounted by Matthew (Mt. 5:3-12) and Luke (Lk. 6:20-23), is particularly challenging, since the statements have become so common as to be almost banal. While Matthew's eight are more familiar to my students, Luke's four Beatitudes provoke a more compelling response. In Luke's portrayal of the Beatitudes, Jesus is less concerned with his community's spiritual state, instead speaking bluntly and directly to his

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*RTU* is edited by Sher Sweet, at the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School and David Streight at CSEE. Submissions regarding innovative programs, good resources, interesting assignments and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

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## Starting a Community

by Susan Kennedy

*Ten Great Freedoms*, by Ernst Lange, a book no longer in print, takes an interesting view of the Ten Commandments. In it, he looks at the commandments and tries to explain each as a “freedom” rather than a constraint. Such is the starting point for the discussion on the formation of community in my 9th grade Humanities section.

Four essential questions guide our study throughout the term: Who am I? What is my place? What does it mean to be human? And How, then, shall we live? Clearly, the Exodus story plays on all of these questions, but none better than “How, then shall we live?” Breaking students into small groups of no more than three, I ask them to look very carefully at two of the commandments. “Look at all the words, individually and then as a whole. What does it tell you about the forming Israelite community? If you didn’t know their history, what would it tell you? Given what you do know of their history, what does it tell you? Now, examine the commandment in terms of ‘freedom.’ How will it help the Israelites keep their freedom to be in community with one another and with God?” This, of course, is the big question.

Discussing these questions is difficult for students and really pushes them to see beyond the restrictions that rules can enforce, but they can see it if I model it for them a bit. We have talked about the concept of sin and separation, of salvation and wholeness, and about the loss of innocence in the process of studying the myths in Genesis. We have also talked about covenant, faith and trust as we read about and discussed the patriarchs in Genesis. So, as they are grappling with this notion of “keeping our freedom,” I remind them of these concepts, putting one on the board about every five minutes or so and I ask them to make connections to those areas of study. Slowly, the pieces of the puzzle start to come together.

Building on this, usually in the next few classes, we look up Hammurabi’s code, the Bill of Rights, and the Major School Rules in place at Northfield Mount Hermon School.

“Who am I? What is my place? What does it mean to be human? And How, then, shall we live?”

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## The “Soul-Force” of Jesus and Gandhi

by David Moseley, Ph.D.

*“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”*

Mohandas K. Gandhi

Teaching the Gospels of the Christian Scriptures to mostly “unchurched” high school students invariably invokes the same reaction as Gandhi’s quote above. One of my own high school teachers used to observe, ruefully, that he didn’t mind God—*it’s just his friends that he couldn’t stand*. Nowhere is this dichotomy more accentuated than perhaps in the question of war and violence, as borne out by recent history. Polling during the opening months of the Iraq War in 2003 showed support for the conflict among self-identified “Christians” at levels more than 10-15% higher than the general American adult population.

This semester I happened to be studying Jesus’ teachings on non-violence in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 38-48) with my Christian Scriptures class the same week as my elective class on “India and Globalization” was considering Gandhi’s principles of *satyagraha*. A proper appreciation of Jesus’ much misunderstood teaching on this subject reinforces Gandhi’s painful disappointment with his self-professed “Christian” oppressors in the British colonial government.

I prepare my students for this passage by going over the logic of Jesus’ argument with Pharisaic interpretations of the *Torah* earlier in the chapter. Later on in class, we discuss the proper context for the seemingly poisonous relationship and inflammatory rhetoric between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew—a product of the local situation in synagogues during post-Revolt Judaism (after 70 C.E.) when Jewish Christians and Pharisaic Jews were at each other’s throats—which accounts for the blatant anti-Semitism of this Gospel and the polemical dramatization of the Jewish religious establishment as a foil to Jesus, especially in the last third of the text. Reminding them of President Bush’s critique of poor educational standards, we examine how the “soft bigotry of low expectations” allows the Pharisees to give themselves a righteous pass, whereas Jesus’ standards require a more searching analysis of intent and the evolution of unchecked hatred and lust into the law-breaking crimes of murder and adultery.

Then we watch a scene from the classic western *Tombstone* (1993), which is easily accessible on YouTube. During

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them. Fishermen gone back to the nets they abandoned to follow him, back to the one thing dispossessed peasants could do to put protein on the family table. But they have been at it all night and they seem to have lost their touch. Nada, nothing, empty nets.

I have a feeling the disciples were fishing for sardines or some other small shore-hugging fish that run in schools at night. I sense that they were fishing on the sly. The Romans, with their ten colonial towns (Decapolis) on the north-east shores, surely controlled the whole industry, and would have restricted use of their best fishing grounds, if not prohibited them entirely, for rowboat hobos like these guys. These night pirates are at least close enough to shore to make a get-away and near enough to hear Jesus' call: Got food?

"No," is the reply. Not "No, Sir" or "No, Dear Lord" just a curt no. They do not recognize him. Was there enough distance or a morning fog? No evidence of much distance at all. Just a little soft-spoken advice: "Throw your nets over the other side of the boat." The subsequent haul is so huge they are struggling to bring it to shore. And these aren't sardines but "one hundred and fifty-three large fish" (vs. 11.) It is in the bounty of the catch that they recognize Jesus; John whispers to Peter "It is the Lord." In a great comic moment, the half-naked Peter puts his clothes on, then jumps in the lake to come greet Jesus properly, if a bit soggy. Jesus already has a charcoal fire going with some fish on it and requests a few more from the bulging net. "Come, have breakfast," he says, with words that just might capture for Christians the full Gospel itself. *Come, have breakfast.*

Three Catholic high schools in San Francisco have a now decade-old tradition, meeting once a week very early in the morning. One faculty member and three or four students go to Martin de Porres Catholic Worker House of Hospitality to serve breakfast to the poor gathered there. Martin's, as it is commonly called, serves a mean, sweet oatmeal punctuated by fresh fruit and still-fresh day-old bread. Its truest service is hospitality, in the long tradition of the Church stretching back through Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker in New York City in the 30's, all the way back to that breakfast on Galilee shore.

The students are often amazed at those gathered on Potrero Avenue, on the shore of Martin's. Familiar faces from

street corners to be sure, the so-called "hardcore homeless" struggling with alcohol, drugs and mental illnesses or Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but also those maybe marginally housed who literally wouldn't be caught dead panhandling, security guards in uniform on their way to work, stretching their less-than-livable wages. Once in while it includes a family, the kids on their way to school. Always a hard-working crew of volunteers sweating over large pots and soapy sinks. Always inspiration. Come, have breakfast.

"Always a hard-working crew of volunteers sweating over large pots and soapy sinks. Always inspiration."

Maybe this is what Jesus means when he is talking to Peter after that Galilee breakfast. Peter is dealing with the guilt over his infamous denial at the Roman jail a few nights previous. They are talking about love. Peter insists, in triplicate, that he loves Jesus. Jesus responds in tri-fold kind: *Feed my sheep, Tend my lambs, Feed my sheep.* (Jn 21:15-19)

The Resurrection seems to be about food, about feeding people, about bread and fish. Perhaps this backs up the words of the Last Supper in three of the Gospels where Jesus, suggesting how he will be present even after his execution, says: *My body is now bread... my blood is now wine.* Those sentences with their intransitive verbs are usually translated the other way around (*This bread is now my body.*) but maybe they make new sense this way, emphasizing that Christians can recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread for the hungry. Maybe understood this way, Jesus' words prepare his disciples to do the work of the Resurrection, the breaking of the bread, the cooking of the fish.

So is a Resurrection faith for Christians a Eucharistic pot-luck, a daily breakfast on Galilee's ever-present shore? Nets seem full to bursting, waiting for Christians to do as the poet Wendell Berry suggests: *Practice resurrection.*

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followers about the social injustices that come with poverty and persecution. "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours." After discussing the historical context of Luke's community, we move on to exploring the implications of Jesus' statements today.

My students often find them difficult to digest. In our world ravaged by war, violence against innocent people, and economic corruption, there is little concrete evidence of present blessing. It is easy to criticize Jesus for asking the oppressed to accept their fate today in exchange for the promise of a future happiness. And yet, the first half of each of the Beatitudes insists on a *present* state of blessing or happiness. This assignment asks students to find a way to reconcile the two – the present and the future states of blessing.

**"What my students find is that while organizations like Catholic Charities... recount heartbreaking stories of their clients' struggles to survive, they also reveal the conviction that the world can, must, and will change."**

I time my teaching of the Beatitudes with a social justice fair at our school, where students are required to visit at least two organizations whose work benefits the marginalized of our society. They then work in groups to determine which Beatitude a particular organization represents, articulating how the work of the organization expands their understanding of Jesus' blessings. What my students find is that while organizations like Catholic Charities or local food banks recount heartbreaking stories of their clients' struggles to survive, they also reveal the conviction that the world can, must, and will change. The women and men who represent the organizations express how their work *with* (not for) the marginalized in society gives their lives meaning. In these conversations, my students come to understand that the Kingdom of God can be thought of not as some undefined future heaven, but rather as relationships between people. The statement "Blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours," becomes not just clichéd words of consolation, but rather a challenge to stand in solidarity with the marginalized to create a just society.

This message is particularly important as my students are preparing to embark on a required forty hours of service to the community. After one of our conversations about the assignment, one student noted that she is coming to think differently about the service requirement. Instead of focusing solely on completing the hours in order to graduate, she is beginning to imagine how her work can contribute to the construction of a more just society. Her shifting idea of how an individual student can impact the world is precisely what I hoped for with the close examination of Luke's Beatitudes. This unraveling of the contemporary application of sacred texts brings a fresh perspective to ancient words.

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## Ecclesiastes Chapter Three

by Andrew McCarron

When I came to teach religion at Trinity School I was asked by my department head to design a new senior elective. I proposed a course that examined how men and women use religion to generate purpose and meaning in a world that often seems devoid of either, especially in the wake of tragedy. I soon realized that the course would be on the problem of suffering, properly known as theodicy. As teachers know all too well, teaching a class for the first time is an experimental endeavor. At best, the class turns out to be as substantial and fresh as a window opened in a stuffy room; and at worst, students don't bite and the teacher must change the course *in medias res* or think of how to do it better next time.

I structured the course around several modern poetic and autobiographical texts that drew from sacred literatures to ask questions about what to do and think when tragic things happened to "good people." The texts I chose were Allen Ginsberg's long poem *Kaddish*, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Lawrence Shainberg's *Ambivalent Zen*, and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. These writers all draw from the Jewish and Christian Bibles and Buddhist Scriptures to answer questions that were modern in nature and therefore accessible to the sensibilities of my students. I have always had a good deal of pedagogical success when I use a modern text to illuminate an ancient one; it is like rubbing a wet sponge across a dry surface, enlivening the textual traces of the past with relevance.

Here is an example. T.S. Eliot emphasizes the importance of "form" and "pattern" through the *Four Quartets*, a long mystical poem which, in part, was written in response to the fragmentation, meaninglessness, and murderous barbarisms of the first half of the twentieth century. In the fifth section of the first quartet "Burnt Norton," Eliot writes:

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

These lines have challenged Eliot commentators since their first publication in 1936. What does he mean by "form" and "pattern?" There are many theories. My students and I came to the conclusion that Eliot was referring to the cyclical patterns

of the process of life and death. Nowhere is this theme more apparent than in the second quartet, "East Coker:"

Houses live and die: there is a time for building  
And a time for living and for generation  
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

Anyone remotely familiar with the Wisdom Literature of the Jewish Bible will recognize the similarity these lines hold with the structure and general theme of Ecclesiastes. Often referred to as the most "existential" of the Biblical texts, Ecclesiastes encourages readers to weigh their personal questions and concerns against a larger pattern of generation and death: "a time to be born, and a time to / die; / a time to plant and a time to / pluck up what is planted; / a time to kill and a time to heal; / a time to break down, and a time / to build up; / a time to weep, and a time to / laugh; / a time to mourn, and a time to / dance..." (Ecclesiastes, 3: 2-4).

The main speaker in the book, identified as Qohelet, proclaims the actions of humans to be inherently "vain," "futile," "empty," "meaningless," "temporary," "transitory," or "fleeting" (depending on the translation) and suggests that one should practice humility by enjoying the simple pleasures of daily life, such as eating, drinking, work and love of others. Likewise, Eliot explores the limitations and possibilities of human thoughts and conditions, contextualizing the despair of a single life within a much larger pattern. Hence his conclusion that

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

I believe that it is difficult to know what students take away from a course. I was under the impression, though, that my students and I made an important discovery; and it could not have been made without the questions Eliot asked and the answers Ecclesiastes continues to offer. The poem helped to illuminate one purpose of an important Biblical text, and moreover, offer all of us (including myself) a key piece of wisdom.

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Each small group discusses and diagrams the similarities and differences between these “laws” and the Ten Commandments with an eye towards forming the ideal community. Once they have made the comparisons, we come back together as a large group and view the movie, *The Truman Show*. The ensuing discussions center around the question, what makes a community ‘ideal’? Students talk about rules and laws and whether they help us keep our freedom as Lange suggests or whether they hinder our freedom. Inevitably, freedom of speech comes up and we work through the issue of allowing others to voice their opinions even when they are discriminatory, derogatory, or inflammatory. This discussion is always heated and fun!

In the end, each small group makes a presentation, using PowerPoint, in which they explain what their ideal community would look like and how this differs from the early Israelite community. The entire process requires significant analytical thinking, cooperative learning, listening skills, and presentation skills and a close consideration of biblical material. In the end, this is a frustrating, but revealing process for the students as they figure out that they are unable to create the perfect community. They are able, sometimes with help, to understand why Moses had such a hard time with the Israelites, why the Israelites were so often afraid and uncomfortable, and why idealism often gives way to realism.

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### Upcoming Issues of Religion Teacher Update

CSEE’s fall issue of Religion Teacher Update will highlight favorite pieces of literature for the world religion’s classroom. Please send us your suggestions, or offer to write a short contribution (shorter than the articles here).

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“Soul-Force”: Continued from Page 2

the first confrontation between the anarchic Cowboys and the legendary lawman Wyatt Earp in a crowded saloon, cowboy Johnny Ringo tries to intimidate Earp’s friend, Doc Holliday, by showing off his superior pistol-twirling skills as an exercise in intimidation. Unaware that he’s supposed to back down or respond in kind, Doc Holliday does neither, but instead twirls his whiskey cup in response, a comic *tour de force* of mockery that absurdly puts the Cowboys on the defensive. In this particular situation, the Cowboys choose to back down rather than risk an unwinnable shooting match.

Gandhi understood how rationality could be neutered by prejudice and cruelty, but repudiated “body-force” (violence) as a solution to conflict. Instead, he proposed the third way of “soul-force” or “truth-force” (*satyāgraha*)—mirroring Jesus’ advocated strategy in response to oppression in Matthew 5 that also transcends the twin evils of submission and violent revenge through the practice of non-violent resistance. My approach in class is heavily dependent on Walter Wink’s fabulous analysis in *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Fortress, 2003).

Jesus repudiates the traditional legal principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—an approach which Gandhi pointed out would leave everyone “blind” and, for that matter, “toothless.” Instead, Jesus urges his followers to “not react violently against those who practice evil” by giving three examples which require proper historical contextualization.

1. *“But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”* I ask a right-handed student to role-play this situation with me in slow-motion, and unfailingly an attempt is made to slap me on my *left* cheek. After pointing out their mistake, a little trial and error soon reveals that Jesus is talking about someone who is being slapped with the back of the right hand on their right cheek—a gesture of admonishment for inferiors in the ancient world (husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, employers and employees). But by turning the *other* cheek to their oppressor, another back-slap is prevented and, instead, an invitation is extended to punch the victim—no doubt very risky, but then this is an attempt to assert equality, robbing the would-be superior of the power to humiliate and degrade.

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2. *“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”* A litigant suing over possession of a coat is fighting a losing battle when it comes to the cost-benefit analysis of their attorney’s fees. Such a defendant must be impoverished if this is their only asset of value. Jesus urges the debtor in this situation to hand over his underwear (“cloak”) as well as his coat to the litigious creditor – in front of the rabbis in the synagogue where the court case was probably being conducted. One can imagine how hysterically amusing Jesus’ audience found this scenario to be. Nakedness is shameful; but the blame is firmly on the one who brought about the nakedness - in this case, the punitive creditor. While the debtor risks an embarrassing walk home in their birthday suit, the notoriety of the person responsible for publicly stripping another human being of everything they had will be the more obstinate community memory.
  
3. *“And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”* Jesus’ followers may well have been victims of the license afforded to Roman soldiers to make Jews carry their weighty backpacks for a mile, but no more than a mile, so that peasants still had the time and energy to work their land, and generate income. Indeed, this policy of restrained brutality also attempted to avoid provoking rebellion. Pragmatic even in their limited coercion, the Romans do not want to jeopardize either the *Pax Romana* or the *Tax Romana*. But Jesus would have his followers clown around for a second mile, refusing to give back the 80 pound pack on a public road where all can see the exaggerated display of forced labor—a ridiculous spectacle visible to both empathizing fellow Jews, as well as an indignant Roman centurion obsessed with law and order and responsible for disciplining his troops. Perhaps the flummoxed legionary might even be reduced to begging for his pack back.

The principles Jesus teaches here—a third way beyond fight or flight – are a blueprint for the Gandhian *satyāgrahi*:

- Seize and never give up the moral high ground
- Revenge is not an option
- Refuse to be oppressed or victimized
- Resist without resorting to the immoral means of your oppressor
- Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate
- By all means meet violence with humor or ridicule
- Seek to change the heart of your oppressor by highlighting their oppression

The path of virtue may well be the path of suffering, for the Christian non-violent resister may well end up with a broken jaw, or walking home naked, or an exhausting march as a Roman soldier’s beast of burden. Nevertheless, the ultimate logic of Jesus’ strategy is saved for the last part of the chapter: *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* (Matt. 5:44) There can be no better illustration of this principle – Jesus’ awesome qualification of his version of the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12), urging *actively doing good* rather than simply *avoiding harm* – than the example of the Nazi resistance leader, Pastor Martin Niemöller. Imprisoned in Dachau from 1938-1945, Niemöller spent years feeling embittered and resentful towards his fellow clergy who had colluded with Nazism – the type of “Christian” that Gandhi compares unflatteringly to Christ himself. He wrote in his journal:

*It took me a long time to understand that God is not the enemy of my enemies.*

Niemöller had to learn to follow the exacting example of Jesus who himself prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners while hanging on the cross. But what he writes next is flabbergasting:

*God is not even the enemy of God’s enemies.*

Jesus’ preaching of reconciliation and forgiveness in the Kingdom of God has as its foundation his conviction that God’s love transcends enmity in all forms. This assurance determines the tactics Jesus prescribes for his followers who ought to resist evil with good, by negating evil rather than multiplying it in a zero-sum cycle of retribution. This is also the essence of Gandhi’s philosophy of *satyāgraha*. And it would become the living creed of the American who managed to synthesize Jesus and Gandhi: Reverend Martin Luther King. All our students would do well to be reminded of the singular achievements of King and Gandhi by replicating Jesus’ third way so often disparaged by Christians themselves as quaint *naïveté*.

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