INTRODUCTION

I've always been stirred and challenged by the Gospels, but also by the lives and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the legendary apostles of nonviolence. As I study these two giants, I hear their urgent pleas to humanity to end its pandemic of violence and to learn the ancient wisdom and way of nonviolence. Their call has influenced the way I read the Gospels and my understanding of Jesus himself.

Indeed, I've come to the conclusion that the more we study Gandhi and Dr. King, the better we will understand Jesus and the Gospels.

If Gandhi and Dr. King are the greatest practitioners of nonviolence in modern history, then the Gospels portray Jesus as the greatest practitioner of nonviolence in all of history. Gandhi described Jesus as *nonviolence par excellence*. Reading Jesus through Gandhi's and King's lens of nonviolence opens up new avenues of insight and depths of wisdom. Every word, teaching, and action of the nonviolent Jesus makes more sense. In turn, we realize that Gandhi and King were right: nonviolence is the way forward on every level—personally, communally, spiritually, nationally, politically, and globally. Nonviolence, we realize, is the way of God, the law of nature, the wisdom of creation, and the hope of humanity. It must become our common practice if we are to have a future.

These days, however, when I look around at the Christian community, I'm dismayed to see how far we remain from that ancient wisdom. Somehow or other, we Christians have become mean, judgmental, argumentative, and condemnatory. Worse, we carry guns, advocate racism and sexism, support war and nationalism, build nuclear weapons, chase after money, and place our trust in all kinds of idols. It's as if Christians don't read the Gospels, much less understand them from a Gandhian/Kingian hermeneutic of nonviolence. (Hermeneutic just means "interpretive lens" or perspective.) Worse, it's as if we have perverted Christianity into some kind of false gospel of violence and war, where some kind of false god blesses war and warmakers, encourages us to kill the enemies of our nation, and wants us to be rich, successful, and powerful, at the expense of billions of impoverished sisters and brothers. This heretical Christianity actually promotes a kind of anti-gospel.

Many people might say that I exaggerate the case, but even if the vast majority of Christians are praying and trying to follow Jesus, nearly every single one stops short at nonviolence. Many people try to be kind, and many even try to do charitable works for the poor—to donate to relief organizations, or pitch in at the local homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Even though they practice this Gospel mandate to "do unto others as you would do to me," they still blindly support U.S. militarism, the latest war, the national "defense," and our nuclear arsenal. The gospel of peace outlines a journey of service to the poor and needy, followed by critical reflection on why there are so many poor and needy people (billions upon billions in today's world), which then leads to passionate work for social, economic,

racial, and environmental justice, which leads to further critical reflection on where all the world's money is going if not to the poor and needy (and the shocking discovery that trillions of dollars have been spent on war over the last century by the U.S. Pentagon, the world's militaries, and the weapons manufacturers and their multinational corporations), which leads us to passionate advocacy for national, global, and nuclear disarmament, which leads to further reflection about how to reorganize a disarmed world based on institutionalized nonviolent conflict resolution and global justice. If you pursue that path, you end up like Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Dr. King, committed to total nonviolence. Few make the entire journey into the holistic nonviolence of Jesus, what Matthew calls, in the Sermon on the Mount, the "narrow path" or the "narrow gate," and that is precisely why we are so violent and on the verge of destroying the planet.

Gandhi thought Matthew's Sermon on the Mount was the greatest writing on nonviolence in history, so he read from it every day for over forty years. He thought that Jesus's prohibition of violent retaliation and killing enemies required that his followers live unarmed and work for justice and peace for all humanity through creative nonviolence. The only way Gandhi could maintain this spiritual path, he concluded, was to use the Sermon on the Mount as a daily handbook, as a personal guide to living nonviolence on a day-to-day level and as a plan for the disarmament of humanity. In that way, the Gospel offered far more than a private religion between me and God alone. It opened an urgent, specific way of life that puts us at the service of humanity and creation so that everyone might live in God's peace.

Gandhi and Dr. King invite us to read the Gospels from the perspective of nonviolence so that the nonviolence of Jesus might disarm us, guide us, and direct our lives, and together, disarm the human family to live in peace as one with creation. If we lived according to Gospel nonviolence as they did, we might become as nonviolent as they were, and together create a more nonviolent world.

How can that be? The Gospels focus on a brown-skinned, Jewish rabbi who was poor, homeless, and a refugee, who walked through ancient Palestine, a backwater of the Roman Empire, preaching and practicing unconditional love, compassion, and justice for the poor and disenfranchised. This Jesus points to the living God as a God of peace and nonviolence, announces God's reign as eternal peace and universal nonviolence, welcomes God's reign of peace and nonviolence here on earth, practices meticulous nonviolence even as he was brutally killed, and commands his followers to practice meticulous nonviolence and build movements of nonviolence to the ends of the earth. Jesus's witness of nonviolence, understood within the examples of Gandhi and Dr. King, is, to say the least, staggering.

Apparently, Jesus was so nonviolent that all you had to do was touch him and you would be healed. I think that's because he didn't have a trace of violence within him. He loved everyone, even as he showed it in different ways. He served the poorest and the disenfranchised, resisted the rich and powerful, spoke the truth with love, denounced injustice and empire, and called everyone to follow him out of the culture of violence into God's reign of nonviolence. One of the first steps he took was to gather a group of followers and form a community of nonviolence around him. He taught and trained these disciples in his way of nonviolence, then sent them ahead of him in pairs on a campaign of nonviolence through-

out the Palestinian countryside in a grassroots march toward the holy city of Jerusalem, where the religious authorities cooperated with the Roman occupiers in the name of God to maintain their occupation, control the population, and steal as many resources as they could.

It was in the temple, the center of Jerusalem and Judaism itself, that Jesus turned over the tables of greed and injustice as the final act of his campaign. Such revolutionary civil disobedience could result only in arrest and trial. He was condemned by the authorities, tortured, and executed—yet he remained steadfast in his nonviolence to the bitter end.

Of course, the Gospels are understood as faith testimonies of the early communities that survived Jesus. Their survival alone proves that something unique happened. They say it plainly: he rose from the dead and came back just as nonviolent—and as subversive—as ever. Jesus appeared to his friends and sent them forward all over again to carry on his campaign of creative, disarming, troublemaking nonviolence. Apparently, they did this. His ragtag gang spread their gospel of nonviolence throughout the region and the world, inviting everyone to put down the sword, take up the cross, and become citizens of God's reign of peace, compassion, and universal love. That campaign continues today.

Perhaps the only reason it continues today is because of the Gospels. Through their amazing stories, the Spirit of God has touched people for two thousand years, despite the overwhelming forces of violence, war, and death. For the first three centuries, the early church kept the Pentecostal flame of nonviolence alive as an illegal underground grassroots movement. After Emperor Constantine's supposed "conversion" and his legalization of Christianity, the church began to conform to the surrounding culture of empire, rejecting the nonviolence of Jesus and allowing for violence, killing, and participation in warfare. Some fled to the desert to keep the Gospel way alive. From these desert fathers and mothers came various monastic traditions in which peace was taught and lived. Eventually, St. Francis and St. Clare reclaimed the nonviolence of Jesus. Later, remnant churches such as the Quakers, Anabaptists, and Mennonites put Gospel nonviolence at the center of their traditions. These new communities of nonviolence gave birth to the Abolitionists, Suffragists, and Transcendentalists, and the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Dorothy Day, and eventually Gandhi and Dr. King.

While most Christians today do not understand the life and teachings of Jesus as a broad vision of daring nonviolence, more and more are beginning to understand that Jesus was nonviolent, not violent, and that every Christian is called to practice Gospel nonviolence.

Four decades ago, I set out to study, research, and discover the insights of nonviolence in the Gospels. I've been speaking about them around the country and the world ever since. This apostolic project of promoting Gospel nonviolence has meant that nearly every day of my life, for over forty years, someone has told me how misguided I am, how violent Jesus actually was, how justified warfare indeed is, and in particular, how holy American war-making is. If one takes up Gospel nonviolence today, I submit, one had better be prepared to be assaulted on all sides with the myth and lies of the false spirituality of violence.

Recently, however, the Catholic Church took a giant leap forward when Pope Francis published the first statement on nonviolence in the history of the Church. On January 1, 2017, he published his message for the Fiftieth World Day of Peace entitled "Nonviolence:

A Style of Politics for Peace," in which he encouraged everyone to reclaim the nonviolence of Jesus and start working for a new culture of nonviolence.

"Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence," Pope Francis wrote. "To be true followers of Jesus today includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence." He was building on Pope Benedict's statement, calling the command to love our enemies in the Sermon on the Mount "the magna carta of Christian nonviolence. It does not consist in succumbing to evil, but in responding to evil with good and thereby breaking the chain of injustice."

Inspired by Pope Francis's breakthrough, I offer my own little contribution. This book is probably the first ever commentary on the Gospels from the perspective of nonviolence, as lived and taught by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. As with other commentaries on the scriptures, I will walk through each Synoptic Gospel, chapter by chapter and verse by verse, but unlike in other commentaries, I will point out the nonviolence of Jesus, his lessons of nonviolence, and its implications for us today. The individual chapters can be read consecutively or kept nearby and consulted during our readings of the Gospels. The strength of this approach is its insistent, persistent, and consistent focus on the total nonviolence of Jesus as a way to break us out of the cultural acceptance and view of violence.

Why Gandhi and King?

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were the greatest teachers and exemplars of active, creative nonviolence in modern history, and both insisted that Jesus was totally nonviolent. Gandhi took the ancient word "*ahimsa*," or "nonviolence," to describe the spiritual life, the path to God, and the best methodology for resistance to tyranny and oppression that can transform cultures of violence into cultures of justice and democracy without using violence or killing anyone. He applied the methodology of nonviolent resistance and social transformation in South Africa and India, where he led a nonviolent revolution to independence from Britain.

In preparation for my book *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writings*, I read all of Gandhi's collected works and discovered a vast vision of creative nonviolence that few, if any, have grasped since he was assassinated on January 30, 1948. While India and the world continue to reject his way of nonviolence, his vision and example remain because he was right: nonviolence is the way of God and is therefore at the heart of the spiritual life and every major religion.

"Nonviolence means avoiding injury to anything on earth in thought, word, or deed," Gandhi said, pointing to a seemingly unreachable ideal. For Gandhi, nonviolence is not just the refusal to hurt or kill: it is active love and truth as a force for positive social change. Since he saw it as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good among the human race, he concluded that nonviolence is more powerful than all nuclear weapons combined. If billions of ordinary people would practice his aggressive nonviolence, with creative, peaceful campaigns against war, nuclear weapons, poverty, racism, injustice, and environmental destruction, then positive social transformation, including nuclear disarmament, the abolition of war and poverty, and true environmental sustainability would occur. Nonviolence always works, he said, because it uses the power of the people to withdraw their consent and cooperation with systemic injustice, violence, and tyranny and to non-

violently demand a new culture of justice, democracy, and nonviolence, even to the point of accepting suffering without retaliating in truth and love to disarm every opponent and oppressor so that all might receive the gift of peace.

"Nonviolence is the greatest and most active force in the world," Gandhi wrote. "One person who can express nonviolence in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality. . . . My optimism rests on my belief in the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop nonviolence. The more you develop it in your own being, the more infectious it becomes till it overwhelms your surroundings and by and by might oversweep the world." Gandhi's vision of active nonviolence was so broad and all-encompassing that he eventually concluded that "Devotion to nonviolence is the highest expression of humanity's conscious state."

When he was a seminarian in Philadelphia, Martin Luther King Jr. was first exposed to Gandhi. Young King attended a lecture on pacifism by the legendary leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, A. J. Muste. Inspired, he attended another lecture not long afterwards by Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, on the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. Johnson had just returned from fifty days in India, which included meetings with Gandhi, and spoke of Gandhian nonviolence as a way of life and a proactive methodology for positive social change. That lecture changed King's life. The next day, he bought six books on Gandhi, including Louis Fischer's classic biography, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, which remains one of the best.

King pondered Gandhi as he finished his doctoral studies in Boston and moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where he became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. When Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus, he was quickly named the new head of the committee to coordinate a citywide boycott to end segregation on buses. From day 1 of the boycott, King intentionally used Gandhi's language and methodology of nonviolence mixed with the teachings and call of Jesus to motivate and encourage the boycotters. This novel approach electrified and empowered the African American community to build a grassroots movement of disarming nonviolence that became a tidal wave of peaceful transformation.

Two months after the start of the bus boycott, King's home was bombed and his wife and baby nearly killed. As a crowd gathered and called for violent retaliation against white people, King gave a spontaneous speech on the ruins of his porch invoking Jesus and Gandhi's way of nonviolence as the only positive response. "We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence," he said that night. "We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: 'Love your enemies; bless those that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.' This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love." This spontaneous speech disarmed the crowd and saved the lives of the white police officers, they later testified.

After the boycott ended successfully with the integration of public transportation, King and Coretta journeyed to India, where they were welcomed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi's colleagues as Gandhi's heir apparent. From then on, King was wholly committed to active nonviolence and would teach it, preach it, and experiment with it publicly throughout the civil rights movement until the day of his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

In his book *Stride toward Freedom*, Dr. King outlined six principles of active nonviolence. First, it is a way of life for courageous people; it is not passive, it actively resists evil. Second, it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win friendship and understanding. Third, it attacks the forces of evil rather than the people who do the evil; it seeks to defeat evil, not people. Fourth, unearned suffering is redemptive; it trains us to accept suffering without retaliating with further violence as we struggle for justice, disarmament, and peace. Fifth, it refuses external physical violence and internal violence of spirit; at its center is the principle of *agapē*/love. Sixth, it believes that the universe is on the side of justice, that we have cosmic companionship, that God is leading us to justice (King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 83–88).

"Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful effective social force on a large scale," King wrote. Jesus furnished the spirit, while Gandhi showed how it could work, he added. "The command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival," he said later. "Love for enemies is the key to the solution of the problem of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist; he is the practical realist."

That last sentence is a paradigm shift in our historic understanding of Jesus. King suggested that we are wrong to read the Gospels as pious platitudes solely for individual practice; rather, they should be read as a practical, down-to-earth, realistic social and political methodology intended for the whole human race. As a Christian deeply rooted in the scriptures, King unpacked Jesus's way of nonviolence in astonishing campaigns against racism, segregation, poverty, and war, first in the South and then throughout the nation. As he was threatened, arrested, and denounced for disturbing the peace, betraying Jesus, and misleading people, he began to unpack new insights into nonviolence that help us understand the Gospels better. We are only now beginning to grasp the theological and spiritual implications of his life and teachings.

For example, Dr. King distinguished between "negative peace" and "positive peace." Negative peace is no peace at all, he said, but a kind of false peace, a veneer of peace, an absence of tension that comes at the expense of justice, which sweeps issues under the rug and maintains an air of civility and the pretense of peace in the midst of systemic injustice, warfare, widespread violence, racism, poverty, nuclear weapons, and environmental destruction. Negative peace leads to complacency and the normalization of violence.

Positive peace, on the other hand, seems loud, messy, disruptive, tense, risky, and frightening as it publicly resists systemic injustice, agitates for justice, and tries to reconcile and create "the Beloved Community." It does not look or feel peaceful at all, because it engages systemic injustice and violence and exposes fear, hostility, hatred, and division in the process of social transformation. It is the peace of peaceful means engaging the culture of violence and war for peaceful ends, and so it demands our full attention, faith, fearlessness, mindfulness, commitment, steadfastness, and forgiveness. In the short term, there seems nothing peaceful about positive peace; but, in the long term, it brings new depths of lasting social peace based in justice.

One of Dr. King's greatest examples of creative nonviolence was his 1963 direct action campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. Thousands of African Americans, mainly teenagers,

were arrested by white police officers for marching against segregation. They kept coming forward, even marching into the face of the fire hoses, and one day, a miracle happened—the white firemen put down their fire hoses and let them march. When that happened, segregation fell. King himself spent Easter week behind bars where he wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," perhaps the greatest document in U.S. history. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," he wrote in his jail cell. "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

> Nonviolent direct action seeks to create a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored. . . . The creation of tension is part of the work of the nonviolent resister. . . . I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. The purpose of direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. . . . We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its puss-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In his letter, Dr. King explained active nonviolence as an organizing methodology and people-power grassroots movement aimed at confronting and transforming injustice, tyranny, oppression, and war into new cultures of justice and peace. King called people to become "nonviolent gadflies who create the kind of tension in society that will help men and women to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brother and sisterhood."

In his description of creative tension, King showed how we can follow the nonviolent, revolutionary Jesus today, by provoking and agitating for God's reign and the end of injustice and empire. His letter brings the Gospels to new life and helps them make sense today. With the help of his letter, we recognize how all that Gospel talk of carrying the cross, proclaiming peace, and renouncing fear makes sense if we are publicly trying to resist the culture of violence and death and welcome God's reign. Every day, King urged movement activists to take up the cross as active nonviolent resistance to structured injustice, perhaps as no one else in U.S. history had ever done before. To his opponents, he said, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, we will still love you, yet still we cannot in conscience obey your unjust laws. . . ." With these insights, King taught nonviolence as a way of discipleship that can be used in grassroots movements to end the greatest injustices; and, at the time of his death, he spoke of new movements that would emerge around the world to end poverty, racism, war, and nuclear weapons. He was only thirty-nine when they killed him, and still just beginning to unpack the implications of Gospel nonviolence. For example, a few hours before he was killed, he said to Bernard Lafayette,

"Make a note that when this campaign is over, we start to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence." That work has been left to the rest of us.

Gandhi and King taught and practiced meticulous nonviolence in thought, word, and deed, and insisted that, if we organize together in strategic grassroots movements of daring, public nonviolence, we can transform ourselves, our nation, and the world. Along the way, they both insisted that their spectacular, visionary nonviolence came from Jesus, even though there were few, if any, books suggesting that Jesus was nonviolent or that Christians should be nonviolent. Together Gandhi and King help us understand the Gospel and everything Jesus said and did, and demonstrated that the Gospel was meant to be lived and put into practice for the disarmament of every heart and the entire world.

What Is Nonviolence Anyway?

The Bible never uses the word "nonviolence." Jesus never used it, St. Paul never used it, St. Francis never used it—no one did until Gandhi starting talking about it and writing about it in South Africa. Most people then and now have been confused by this clumsy word. A literal interpretation might mean "avoiding physical violence against others"; and, while many people might avoid physical violence and consider themselves "nonviolent," they would not come close to Gandhi's and King's grand vision of nonviolence. Some might interpret the term to mean refraining from violence or any form of coercion or domination against others, even refusing to condemn or shame others. Others confuse "nonviolence" with "civil disobedience," and think it means peacefully breaking unjust laws to uphold a higher law. Civil disobedience, however, is only one tool in the arsenal of nonviolence, which also includes boycotts, public fasts, vigils, strikes, marches, symbolic actions, and the use of art and music.

My friend Kazu Haga teaches nonviolence to prisoners and distinguishes between hyphenated and unhyphenated nonviolence. "Non-violence" with a hyphen is not what we are talking about. He defines "non-violence" with a hyphen as the absence of physical violence, the lack of physical violence in one's life, a kind of passive pacifism that is unrealistic, unresponsive, reactive at best, and complicit with the culture of violence. The refusal to use violence or any form of coercion or domination against others is definitely part of nonviolence, but just the beginning. If it remains passive and silent, and does not involve active non-cooperation and resistance to the culture of violence and death, then it is not only not helpful; it is part of the problem, if not the very problem itself.

"Nonviolence" without a hyphen, Haga says, refers to something much bigger—the force, power, and Spirit of God's love and truth at work within us and among us communally and globally to disarm our hearts, disarm our world, and welcome the fullness of God's peaceful presence with justice and mercy on earth.

For decades, I've taught that active nonviolence begins with the truth that all life is sacred, that we are all equal sisters and brothers, all children of the God of peace, already reconciled, all one, all already united, and so we could never hurt or kill another human being, much less remain silent while wars wage, people die in poverty, and nuclear weapons and environmental destruction threaten us all. As we deepen into this vision of our common

unity, we come to understand that we are one with all humanity, all creatures, all creation, and God. So nonviolence is much more than a tactic or a strategy; it is a way of life that is based in the oneness of creation, the unity of life itself. It is not passive but active love and truth that seek justice and peace for the whole human race and all of creation, and so resists systemic evil and violence, persistently reconciles with everyone, works to create new cultures of justice and peace, yet insists there is no cause however noble for which we support the killing of any human being. Instead of killing others, we work to stop the killing and are even willing to be killed in the struggle for justice and peace.

The visionary nonviolence taught by Gandhi and King flows from our disarmed hearts, from our inner depths, where we renounce our inner violence, let God disarm us and cultivate interior nonviolence, then moves us to practice meticulous interpersonal nonviolence with our families, neighbors, co-workers, communities, cities, nation, all creatures, and Mother Earth. As we face the structures of violence head on with the power of organized nonviolence, we build grassroots, bottom up, people-power movements to end tyranny and injustice and institutionalize nonviolent democracy and social, economic, racial, and environmental justice. When organized on large national and global levels, active nonviolence can peacefully transform entire societies, even the world, as Gandhi demonstrated in India's revolution, as the civil rights movement showed, as the growing women's, LGBTQ, and environmental movements demonstrate, as the People Power movement showed in the Philippines, and as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the churches of South Africa showed against apartheid. Gandhi said that nonviolence, when it is harnessed, becomes contagious and can disarm the world.

A few years ago, social scientists and scholars Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan published a groundbreaking book, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, which studied massive data about every conflict, violent revolution, and war from 1900 to 2006 and concluded that where nonviolence was used, it almost always brought about a more nonviolent, more just, democratic, and lasting outcome than violent methods of resistance. Their research has proved that everything Jesus, Gandhi, and King taught was correct. Nonviolence really does work when it's organized on a mass scale to bring about justice and disarmament.

In an effort to define nonviolence, I proposed in my book *The Nonviolent Life*, that the holistic nonviolence of Gandhi and King demands three simultaneous attributes: we have to be nonviolent to ourselves; at the same time, we have to be nonviolent to all people, all creatures, and Mother Earth; and also at the same time, we have to be part of the global grassroots movement of nonviolence. We can't just pick one or two of these attributes; we have to practice all three at the same time, otherwise it's not the holistic, authentic nonviolence of Jesus, Gandhi, and King.

The Synoptic Narrative of Active Nonviolence

In light of the teachings of Gandhi and King, we will read the three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—from the perspective of nonviolence for clues about the nonviolence of Jesus. In this new light, we will see him form a community of nonviolence, lead a nonviolence training and teach-in with his Sermon on the Mount, then organize a

grassroots movement of nonviolence from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he confronts the imperial establishment and engages in nonviolent civil disobedience, only to be arrested, tortured, and killed, and then rise from the dead to urge his followers to carry on his grassroots campaign of nonviolence to the ends of the earth.

Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, the new lawgiver, who gives us something far greater than the Ten Commandments, a whole new series of commandments of nonviolence outlined in the Sermon on the Mount that turns the ways of the world upside down. Mark describes Jesus in daily, ongoing nonviolent resistance to the empire, to violence and death itself, creating tension everywhere he goes to expose latent violence and call everyone to repent and welcome God's reign of nonviolence. Luke presents Jesus as a teacher of compassion, a servant of the poor but, most of all, a movement organizer who trains his followers, building a grassroots campaign of nonviolence that marches to Jerusalem in a final showdown of nonviolent resistance against the structures of injustice. When all hope seems lost, he appears to the downcast disciples, tells them the story of God's nonviolence moving throughout history, and inspires them to carry on his illegal campaign of revolutionary nonviolence.

Written decades after the Synoptics (probably in the 90s, but possibly as late as the 110s), the Gospel of John describes an altogether different story, one that begins with the dramatic civil disobedience in the temple and culminates in the raising of Lazarus as a symbolic, dramatic image of the God of life calling the entire human race, which is stuck in the culture of violence, the tomb of death, back to new life. In this book, I will investigate the nonviolence of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Those who are interested in John's Gospel might want to read my book on John called *Lazarus, Come Forth!*

The Gospels present a vision of nonviolence from the world's greatest visionary of nonviolence, which has never been surpassed and rarely been attempted. At its bottom line, Gospel nonviolence says we are not allowed to kill or support killing or warfare, no matter what the reason, no matter what the authorities declare, no matter how grave the threat we face. There is no cause for which we ever again support the taking of a single life. Instead, the Gospels commend steadfast nonviolence, persistent reconciliation, and all-encompassing inclusion; constructive work for structured justice, disarmament, and equality; lifelong resistance to systemic, nationalistic, imperialistic violence balanced with universal love toward every human being as one's sister and brother and all creatures and creation itself.

If we engage in active nonviolence as the nature of God and the methodology of God as Jesus did, then we will discover that nonviolence is infinitely creative. There are vastly more creative alternatives with nonviolent resistance to evil and injustice than with violent resistance. One might conclude that there is always a nonviolent alternative, including going to our deaths nonviolently as opposed to trying to kill others, or being angry and violent. So, for example, for many people, this challenge comes down to the question, Is self-defense justifiable? When seen through the lens of Gospel nonviolence, we realize, as Gandhi did, a better question is, Is violent self-defense justifiable? The answer becomes no. Nonviolent self-defense is the only justifiable response to violence, according to the Gospel of Jesus. This is the scandal of Jesus, God, and the Gospels. Jesus and the God of Jesus described in the Gospels want us to learn the lessons, methodology, and wisdom of nonviolence.

From the perspective of creative nonviolence, the Gospels present a new image of what it means to be human. In the life of Jesus, we discover that to be human is to be nonviolent, to be nonviolent is to become, like Jesus, fully human. Instead of the inhumanity of violence, which diminishes those who wield it while killing those who suffer it, nonviolence leads us to the fullest possibilities of humanity—to becoming people of universal love, universal compassion, universal solidarity, universal peace, indeed, total nonviolence. That's why Gandhi concluded that nonviolence is the highest form of human consciousness. What is more, he believed that Gospel nonviolence could be applied to communities, nations, and the entire world, and when every human being finally embraces total nonviolence as a way of life, God will reign on earth exactly as God reigns in heaven. "The kingdom of God is nonviolence," he said. This is a profound theological insight that needs to be explored.

A Note about Terms and Language

I have used only the New American Bible as my source. I consider it one of the best translations, if not the best, of the New Testament. It has two sets of excellent footnotes, and I highly recommend it. Before we jump into Matthew, let me mention a few thoughts about inclusive language.

By and large, I have tried to use inclusive language, and I have, on occasion, slightly adapted the text of the New American Bible in this respect. In general, I have tried to avoid male pronouns for God and deliberately tried to use the term "*the God of peace*," instead of the word "God." I base this entire premise on the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus makes the scandalous announcement that God is a God of peace and universal love. We read this in his two foundational statements: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God" (Mt. 5:9)—and so, "the God of peace"; and, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons and daughters of your heavenly God, for God makes the sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt. 5:44–45). These statements are the basis of the Synoptic Gospels and of my entire argument: God cannot be both warlike and peaceful, violent and nonviolent. God is peaceful, universally loving, and totally nonviolent.

The use of this term, "*the God of peace*," is in keeping with the Synoptic Gospels and helps us better understand the God being described—not our commonly misconceived image of a violent, warlike, vengeful, punishing God, but a nonviolent, peaceful, universally loving, and compassionate God. I could also have said, "the God of universal love" or "the God of active nonviolence." I'm highlighting this term right up front because I'm not trying to be deceptive or manipulative. You will notice it, for example in the infancy narratives, especially Luke's story of Mary. The danger in using this phrase is that it can project our limited understanding onto the mystery of God to whatever advantage we want, just as if I said "the God of America," "the God of socialism," or "the God of free enterprise," throughout this book, and then wrote, "See how the Gospels support America, socialism, or free enterprise."

Some may object, but I note that St. Paul and many saints used this term, "the God of peace." Pope Francis has even said, "God's name is peace." I find that this term helps us better understand the profound message of Jesus. To me—and I dare say to many, including

Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King Jr.—it is clear that the message of peace, nonviolence, and universal love pervades the Gospel, that a new way of understanding and naming God is being announced, one that has been so thoroughly ignored and rejected for nearly two thousand years that it sounds like I'm making it all up and describing something new. Instead, with Pope Francis, I'm trying to get us back to the radical message of the Synoptic Gospels: God is totally nonviolent, peaceful, and universally loving and created us to be the same, to be God's beloved sons and daughters who are freely, equally, and totally nonviolent, peaceful, and universally loving.

One of the breakthroughs that a hermeneutic of nonviolence can offer besides a new way of understanding the nature of God is a new understanding of the kingdom of God—as a realm of total nonviolence, where there is no more violence, war, racism, sexism, injustice, hunger, or killing. It is beyond anything we have ever imagined—a place where everyone lives in universal love, universal compassion, and universal peace, in the presence of the God of universal love, compassion, and peace. It is even harder to imagine Jesus's announcement that this otherworldly realm is near and available to every one of us right now. Perhaps that is why the question most frequently asked by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels is, "To what can I compare the kingdom of God?" Even Jesus didn't know how to explain it! He didn't have the word "nonviolence," so he used parables to describe it and left everyone confused, beginning with the male disciples. It is for this reason that Gandhi came to the brilliant conclusion that "the kingdom of God *is* nonviolence."

So I continue to use the limited and problematic term "the kingdom of God." Sometimes I say, "the reign of God," but both words are rooted in exclusive male language and patriarchy. I do not like the phrases others have tried, such as "the kindom of God," "the community of God," "the family of God," even "the empire of God." Dr. King spoke of "the Beloved Community," which some prefer, but I do not think any of these terms captures the broad, universal vision of Jesus's term or the sharp political semantics featured throughout the Synoptics, especially in Mark. I thought seriously about using the original Greek word employed by the Synoptics—*basileia*—because then no one would be offended, even though that word, too, has overtones of patriarchy. So I have kept Jesus's problematic term, and I am consoled knowing that Jesus himself had difficulty talking about what he most wanted us to know about.

You will also notice that instead of the mysterious phrase "Son of Man" from the book of Daniel, which Jesus uses to refer to himself, I use the term, "*Son of Humanity*," which is slightly more inclusive. As Walter Wink and Ched Myers have written, this term, as I understand it, refers to "the fullest human being," as if to say, "the one who is most truly human, and therefore, the human being most like God." They translate it as "the Human One," or "the Human Being." I believe this mysterious phrase is trying to get at the total nonviolence of Jesus, as both human and divine. So I have used the expression "Son of Humanity" in the hope that it might be a little more palatable to readers, but I agree that it too is clumsy.

In addition, Jesus clearly used the phrase "Father" or "Abba" (meaning "Daddy") to refer to his intimate, beloved God, and nearly every scholar agrees that this was an original teaching of Jesus of Nazareth; no one had ever said this before in history. For many, that patriarchal phrase is another stumbling block, and I have tried in general not to use it, though that

too is problematic since it was so original to the text. As we jump into the Synoptics and the ongoing struggles of noninclusive language, the ancient scriptures, and current studies, sensibilities, and awareness, my hope is that we not let our translation problems prevent us from hearing and embracing Jesus's spectacular vision and teachings of total nonviolence and universal love.

Further Points to Keep in Mind

One of the dangers of Gospel commentaries is that, by their very nature, they are repetitive. So scholars agree that the Gospel of Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke drew much of their material from Mark, but also from another common source, commonly known as "Q" (from the German word *Quelle*, "source") consisting mainly of sayings, as well as from their own unique sources. Each of the Gospels was composed for a particular audience, and each was shaped by the theological perspective of the individual evangelist. Thus, Matthew and Luke (but not Mark) contain accounts of Jesus's birth, but with different details.

For our purposes, I have tried to highlight the subtle distinctions within the framework of Gandhian/Kingian nonviolence between the three Gospels, but we are inevitably going to return to the same stories and sayings again, some of them occurring in all three Gospels. So a certain amount of redundancy is unavoidable when writing and reading a commentary, and it gets especially challenging by the time we get to Luke, although there is much exciting original material there. So, I urge the reader to be patient and generous and to use my efforts as a help to stir your own reflections on these big Gospel themes and questions about violence, nonviolence, universal love, compassion, discipleship, the cross, resurrection, God, and the person of Jesus. I do not expect most readers to read this book straight through; few people read commentaries straight through. Instead, commentaries become reference books that you keep and refer to for the rest of your life. You can also pray with this commentary over time as you read the Gospels; that is my hope, that it will help you in your reading of the Synoptics and draw you closer to understanding and knowing the nonviolent Jesus.

Over the decades, as I have studied and taught the Gospels and Jesus's nonviolence, I have seen thousands of students, retreatants, and congregation and audience participants project our violence, anger, resentments, hurts, and wounds onto the person of Jesus to varying degrees. We presume that Jesus in this or that instance was angry, yelling, and violent. I propose the shocking alternative that he never succumbed to that behavior. I think he was fully human and fully nonviolent, and that he believed any of us could reach his heights of nonviolence. He was gentle and slow to anger, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and my friend the Buddhist Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Once, Jesus is described as frustrated by his disciples (after his transfiguration); on another occasion, in response to the harassment of the religious authorities, he lets out "a deep sigh." In the Sermon on the Mount, as we shall see, Jesus clearly forbids anger in the first of the six antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount. I think Jesus did not resort to anger because he saw there the deep hidden roots of violence, but, more importantly, he found a way beyond anger and fear into the grief and

joy of creative nonviolence that few have explored. Indeed, there is only one moment in the Synoptic Gospels where we're told that Jesus is "angry" (Mk. 3:5), but, as I write, this is due to a bad translation from the Greek; he was deeply upset and disturbed, which I think is different than anger.

More often than not, Jesus is grieving throughout the whole narrative, which is how I understand Gandhi and King over the course of their public struggles, and my own life experience of public experimentation with nonviolence. There's a profound difference between a grieving, nonviolent Jesus and the projection of our anger onto him, though few seem to consider or understand this. I invite readers to withhold their judgment on this portrayal but instead to meditate with me on the depths of Jesus's gentleness, nonviolence, grief, and unconditional love, and how we might take new steps into his profound nonviolence. (For this insight, I thank my friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Once during a visit with him in Cape Town, South Africa, he fell into my arms sobbing, trying to describe to me the nonviolence and grief of Jesus and God. That day, he embodied it to me and demonstrated it. He taught me personally the Gospel path beyond anger and fear through grief, empathy, and nonviolence, to universal compassion and joy, and how that way is far more fruitful and blessed.)

I share these reflections because over the decades, I have been accused of being an absolutist with regard to nonviolence. Let me say up front that this is precisely my point: I am not an absolutist about nonviolence or anything because I am not willing to kill for my beliefs! By its very definition, I submit, absolutism is rooted in violence. That is why I am offering this book. The whole point of this hermeneutic is non-absolutist; people kill one another over their absolute and ideological principles. I am arguing precisely against that, and propose a new hermeneutic that is truly nonviolent, non-ideological, and non-absolutist. That's the good news of the Gospel of universal love and visionary nonviolence.

A major problem I wish to avoid is perpetuating any stereotypes from these texts. As the reader will see, I focus on the narrative and themes embedded in the Gospel stories, not historical-critical interpretation. Of course, I acknowledge that these texts were written decades after the events they describe, and that they were written in part to address the situation and the concerns of the communities that received them. One of the great historical problems with the interpretation of these texts over the past two thousand years has been the horrific rise of antisemitism by Christians. Much of the blame can be placed on John's Gospel, with its regular naming of "the Jews" as the ones who wanted to kill Jesus, which makes no sense since nearly all the characters are Jewish. As Wes Howard-Brook points out, the problem has its source in a mistranslation; the word should have been translated "Judeans."

For the Synoptics, the problem begins with the growth of the early church from the community of Jesus's original Jewish disciples into an increasingly Gentile church. By the time the Gospels were written, they were employing a "supersessionist" theology, or "replacement" theology, which saw the new Christian church as replacing the Old Covenant with Israel, with the Jewish people as the chosen people, the people of God. Today, we roundly reject any notion that the church has replaced Judaism or "superseded" the Jewish people as the people of God. I do not agree with supersessionism and want to avoid any hint of the

prejudice and ideology that led to the historic, horrific rise of Christian antisemitism. That goes against the very nonviolence, compassion, and universal love that Rabbi Jesus taught. That means, with this commentary, we want to embark with other scholars and students of the Gospels on a new post-supersessionist reading of the Gospels to find the deeper meaning of Jesus and his message of universal love and nonviolence.

Almost everyone in the Gospels, including Jesus and his disciples, is Jewish. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks within the lineage of the Jewish prophets and teaches that his call of universal love and total nonviolence is the point of the law and the prophets. The Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism itself are essential to understanding Jesus and what it means to be a person of peace and nonviolence. The Hebrew Scriptures remain the word of God, the Jewish people remain the chosen people, and we name Jesus as the Messiah, only here we are naming him as a Messiah of total nonviolence, which no one ever expected.

In particular, the Synoptics feature harsh criticism of the Pharisees, to the point that it raises questions about Jesus's own nonviolence. This presumption has led to many grievous misunderstandings, a distorted view of Jesus that contradicts his own teachings, and the demonization of the Jewish people and the rise of Christian antisemitism. The conflicts we read between the Pharisees, scribes, and religious authorities and Jesus have more to do with the situation at the time the Gospels were written, when there was a widening conflict between what became rabbinic Judaism, based in the synagogues, and the emerging church—both of these essentially offshoots of the temple-focused Judaism of Jesus's time. The Pharisees were actually closest to Jesus among the many movements of the time; some scholars have even speculated that Jesus was himself a Pharisee. Although Pharisees did not survive beyond the first century, at the time the Synoptics were written the growing Gentile church began to project onto this group the embodiment of legalism, juridicism, spiritual narcissism, and hypocrisy. Over time, these became attributes projected onto Judaism itself, whereas the evangelists most likely intended their portrayal of the conflict as a warning and cautionary teaching against such tendencies in the church. Actually, Jesus himself calls his disciples to surpass the high bar of righteousness set by the Pharisees. He calls for "perfection," not them; he is the one who makes the Torah even more demanding. While he challenges instances of hypocrisy, he teaches his disciples to adhere to their teachings. Luke even portrays the Pharisees as hospitable and solicitous to Jesus. (For further study, I recommend *The Pharisees*, edited by Joseph Sievers and Amy Jill-Levine [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021]; for a synopsis, see Chris Seeman, "Scholars Outline History of the Pharisees and Roots of Harmful Anti-Jewish Stereotypes," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 19, 2022.)

We reject any and every trace of anti-Jewish prejudice; reject any projection of attributes such as hypocrisy onto Judaism or Jewish people in general; renounce antisemitism and supersessionism; honor Judaism and the Jewish people; seek to practice nonviolent universal love toward one and all; and lift up the spectacular, prophetic Jewish vision of shalom that is at the heart of Jesus's life, teaching, death, and resurrection. We simply want to explore how Jesus responded to every challenge and trace of violence with loving nonviolence, particularly the harassment he faced from the religious authorities who were rightly threatened by his prophetic stand, revolutionary movement, and widespread popularity.

As we seek to avoid these dangers and pitfalls, we can eventually get beyond the clumsy word "nonviolence" itself and discover, as I have along the way, that the Synoptic Gospels are ultimately about God and present a radical new image of God and God's sovereignty as total nonviolence and universal love announced in the life, teachings, and actions of the nonviolent Jesus. It is this breakthrough vision that I hope we can stay focused on, and all the rich implications it holds for our lives, hearts, souls, politics, and world.

Because they insist that Jesus and God are totally nonviolent, the Gospels demonstrate that Jesus and God, by their very nature, cannot force any human being to disarm and practice nonviolence. With this insight, we step into the mystery of God's gift of free will, which makes much more sense within the framework of Gandhian/Kingian nonviolence. Nonviolence cannot be forced upon anyone; we cannot force people to convert to nonviolence. Like Jesus, we can only invite, persuade, and call one another to the wisdom and way of nonviolence, using every reasonable nonviolent approach possible, including public action and civil disobedience to systemic injustice, and ultimately disarming us and winning us all over through creative, redemptive, suffering love, and innocent martyrdom—the paschal mystery of the cross.

The Gospels portray Jesus as living out the call of Deuteronomy 30:15–20: "I have set before you life and death . . . choose life that you and your descendants may live." Since we are given the choice to accept or reject the fullness of life through God's will of total nonviolence and universal love, it becomes clear through the story and history how we have rejected God's will of nonviolence in favor of our own self will, individually and collectively, which has led us down the endless cycle of violence into war, hostility, hatred, injustice, and now, the real possibility of planetary destruction through nuclear war and environmental destruction. In other words, we are free to choose "death," the culture of violence and war, if we want, and we have done so repeatedly. This is why Dr. King ended his famous "I've been to the mountaintop" speech, delivered the night before he was assassinated, with the declaration: "The choice is no longer violence or nonviolence; it's nonviolence or non-existence."

As we begin to ponder the narrative and teachings of Jesus within the framework of nonviolence, we begin anew to understand the implications of this choice between God's will and our own stubborn, egocentric, self-centered wills, individually and globally. We begin to understand perceived threats of eternal punishment in hell, especially in some of the parables, as "consequence." This does not mean God is violent or unfair; we're being given a choice and it's up to us to choose wisely God's will of nonviolence. The idea of karma is simply about cause and effect—every action leads to a response, a reaction; if you do this, that will happen. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches, as Gandhi and Dr. King later insisted, that the means are the ends *in progress,* that you reap what you sow, that what goes around comes around, that every violent deed leads to the inevitable consequence of further violence down the road, including one's own further entrapment in violence.

Another way to consider these difficult passages is to see them simply as warnings. Any loving parent tells their little child not to place her hand on a stove because if she does, it will get burned by the heat of the fire. The parent is not threatening the child but protecting the child. The parent simply does not want the child to get hurt. From this angle, we see how Gandhi and Dr. King never spoke in threatening terms but consistently warned everyone of

the consequences of their violence, racism, and warmaking. We see this most dramatically perhaps in the consistent warnings and calls for repentance (as opposed to threats of divine punishment) made by Archbishop Oscar Romero in the months before he was brutally assassinated at the altar while presiding at Mass.

As we read through the text, I invite us to keep in mind the eschatological implications of Gospel nonviolence, and to hear the Gospels as hopeful, good news. Jesus calls us to practice nonviolence in thought, word, and deed, so that everything we do will lead to a nonviolent reaction, so that we will be held safely in the arms of the God of peace while speaking prophetically God's word of peace to the culture of violence and war, and so that our lives will bear the good fruit of creative nonviolence in new levels of disarmament, justice, equality, and an ever-widening universal love.

We are just beginning to apply Gandhian/Kingian nonviolence to ourselves, our communities, our politics, and our world. Likewise, we have hardly begun to develop a theology and spirituality of nonviolence. We need a new generation of scripture scholars to read and teach the Gospels from the perspective of creative nonviolence, and I urge Christians around the world to take up this exciting new approach to the Gospels, the church, and life itself.

My only qualification for daring to attempt this reading is that I am a lifelong activist: I have forty years of experience with experimenting in creative nonviolence at every level, including participating in hundreds of nonviolent protests, getting arrested some eighty-five times, standing in court hundreds of times, and spending many long nights in jails around the country, as well as in war zones around the world. It's my lifelong passion and belief in Gospel nonviolence, coupled with my profoundly hopeful experiences on the ground with creative nonviolence, as well as my faith in the God of peace, the nonviolent Jesus, and the many teachers and practitioners of Gospel nonviolence who have sustained me, that gives me the courage to present the Synoptic Gospels from this fresh perspective. In a world on the brink of destruction, now more than ever, I am learning, the Gospels offer truly good news.

My hope and prayer are that every Christian from now on will read the Gospels from the perspective of Gandhian/Kingian nonviolence, and that with this fresh perspective, we might all choose Jesus's way and wisdom of active nonviolence, that we might carry on Jesus's bottom-up, people-power grassroots campaign of creative nonviolence for global disarmament, justice, and environmental sustainability. May these commentaries inspire you to dig deeper into the Gospels and discover your own insights, that you might follow the nonviolent Jesus ever more faithfully and help spread his way and wisdom of loving, disarming, revolutionary nonviolence far and wide.

Pentecost, 2023