

Diamond Bar United Church of Christ
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Making Life Wonderful

Luke 6:37-38. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Two thousand years ago, a man started telling people: “I know how to make life wonderful. Follow me, and I’ll show you.” He showed them a vision of a community called “the Kingdom of God,” where every person is valued, loved, accepted, cared for – where every person makes their unique contribution to the whole, and celebrates life. Where nobody is oppressed. Where it is safe to be yourself and speak your truth. And where love is the rule, not the exception. People caught that vision, and lived it, at least partially. A movement swept through the known world, sharing that vision and transforming lives.

And, let’s be honest, from the beginning Christians fell short of their vision. The earliest Christian records are from the apostle Paul. His letters show his efforts to get church folk to stop their judging and quarreling, their status-seeking and general meanness, and to remember their vision. About three hundred years after Jesus, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. By that time the inclusive love of the Kingdom of God, with men and women and slaves and people of “high status” in radical equality, was barely a memory in most places. Too often, Christianity was used as a tool for political control.

But the gospel was still there. Over the centuries people kept hearing Jesus and catching that vision of making life wonderful, not just in heaven after we die but on earth, with real people, warts and all. The stories of these visionaries still inspire us today. Stories of the radical compassion of St. Francis for the poor in the cities. The fearless integrity of Martin Luther that started the Reformation. The transformative nonviolent action of Martin Luther King, who called Jesus’ vision “the Beloved Community.” We long, I long, to make a contribution to Jesus’ vision as these people have.

On March 6, 1992, I caught Jesus’ vision up close and personal. Since that time, I have been trying to live it. The results have been mixed. God and I are getting on well. It’s people I sometimes have trouble with. I have never doubted my love and acceptance from God, and that faith has been a wonderful gift. I sometimes don’t return that love the way I want, but I know that God will welcome me back every time I do. I *have* wondered whether it is possible for me to give and receive love with certain people— whether certain relationships are just too broken, certain situations too hopeless. That attitude is not gospel. With God all things are possible. Transformation is always possible. But how?

To see the vision is not to know how to get there. We Christians have this awesome vision of the Kingdom of God. I’m not sure we have very good instructions about how to implement this kind of community that Jesus showed us. I learned this the hard way when I volunteered to lead peacemaking efforts at a church that was in deep conflict. I worked with faithful and caring people. We all saw a

vision of healing and peacemaking, and none of us knew how to get there. I read Gandhi and King, and I still couldn't figure it out. Life was not wonderful.

Out of my frustration, I decided to educate myself. I expected to try out a variety of tools for peacemaking and experiment with them, and cobble together some mix that would help me to be at least a little more effective in difficult relationships. This is the way I developed in my relationship with God—over time, with a little help from this spiritual practice and a little help from that insight. Instead I found a tool so simple and powerful that I believe it can transform virtually any relationship. I want everyone to have an opportunity to learn it. I believe it is going to help us come so much closer to our vision for the Beloved Community—closer than I ever dreamed possible.

This tool is called Nonviolent Communication, sometimes also called Compassionate Communication. It was developed over decades by Marshall Rosenberg, a civil rights activist, as a tool for “making life wonderful.” Marshall likes to make life wonderful by working for social change and mediation of global conflict. (He is now in his seventies.) NVC is gaining momentum, with over 250,000 people a year worldwide being exposed to it. When I first heard about NVC, I worried that it was another one of those New Age feel-good fads. (And if you talked to a few of its promoters, you'd worry too.) But then I watched Marshall's craggy face (on video) as he talked about the Palestinian man who screamed at him, “murderer,” the couple who had the same argument for thirty-nine years of marriage, and my favorite, his son who wouldn't take out the trash. Then I knew: NVC is the real thing.

The Palestinian who shouted, “murderer,” had an *enemy image* of Marshall, triggered by the support America has given for Israel's oppression of Palestinians. Jesus is clear about what we are to do about enemies: love them. But how? It begins with mutual understanding, at the level of feelings and needs. Marshall heard no attack, no enemy, only a hurting human being with unmet needs. He reflected those needs back to the man:

Man: Murderer! (Outside the mosque were tear gas shells marked “made in U.S.A.”)

Marshall: Are you angry because you would like my government to use its resources differently? (He didn't know whether his guess was correct, but what was critical was his sincere effort to connect with the man's feeling and need.)

Man: Damn right I'm angry! You think we need tear gas? We need sewers, not your tear gas! We need housing! We need to have our own country!

Marshall: So you're furious and would appreciate some support in improving your living conditions and gaining political independence?

Man: Do you know what it's like to live here for twenty-seven years the way I have with my family—children and all? Have you got the faintest idea what that's been like for us?

Marshall: Sounds like you're feeling very desperate and you're wondering whether I or anybody else can really understand what it's like to be living under these conditions.

This discussion continued for forty minutes. The man invited Marshall to Ramadan dinner at his home that same night.

The couple who had been having the same argument (about money) for thirty-nine years of marriage thought they had a “fundamental disagreement,” they had to “endure.” NVC says, don’t endure. Make life wonderful! Marshall claims that once he helps a couple identify the *needs* that underlie their argument, they can reach a mutually satisfactory agreement within twenty minutes. We haven’t been taught how to relate at the level of universal human needs, or even be aware of needs. We are used to thinking about specific strategies. That couple both wanted control of the checkbook– a strategy. And we’ve been taught to label and blame. He was a miser. She was irresponsible. So nothing could be resolved. At the level of needs, she needed to be valued. He needed freedom from fear about financial security. Once they figured that out, they found a strategy to meet both of those needs.

Now for the example that hits closer to home for me. Marshall’s kid wouldn’t take out the trash. Every time Marshall tried to enforce the garbage rule, it was war. Isn’t it terrifying the things parents will do to try to get their kids to obey? Now here’s a curious thing. Whenever it snowed, the same kid would set his alarm clock early and race down to the corner to shovel the sidewalk of a disabled lady’s house, without pay, anonymously. Would he shovel his own walk? No way! What was going on here? The child enjoyed giving, when *he* wanted to. The need for autonomy, for choice in your own life, is key to making life wonderful. NVC teaches us to meet that need for choice by never making a demand, and never *hearing* a demand. (Please note that NVC includes the “protective use of force.” Parents will want to use force at times to keep their children safe.) No demands. Boy, does this require a change in my attitude as a parent. I’m still wrapping my head around it. Yet as Mark hits his teen years I need to learn to trust him to make wise choices– not because I say so; I’m not always going to be around to tell him what to do. I want to trust that he will choose to make life wonderful, in his own way. I’m learning, Mark.

These three stories illustrate the core of NVC. First, by not holding an enemy image of the Palestinian man, but seeing him as a hurting person with unmet needs, Marshall was able to connect with him and build a friendship. *Love your enemies*. Second, shown by the couple who argued about money, we can solve longstanding disagreements by setting aside labels and judgments (“irresponsible”, “miser”), and discovering the feelings and needs behind the behavior. *Do not judge, and you will not be judged*. Finally, the story of taking out the trash shows us the secret to why nonviolent communication works so well: we all love to give of ourselves, to contribute to making life wonderful for another person, if we see the need, and choose to give from the heart. *Give, and it shall be given to you*. Here is the core NVC question: “How can I help make your life more wonderful?” One of the reasons I love to hang around churches is that church people understand the joy of giving. Now we can learn how to give what people really need. In your bulletin is a page listing universal human needs. I invite you to look at it before the Wednesday class and reflect on the beauty of these needs. Yes, beauty. Honoring these needs for ourselves and each other, we can make life wonderful.

We all love to connect with another person, if our needs for safety and choice can be met. Connecting with people from the heart, and giving freely, out of the joy of giving. These are the building blocks of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God. We already have the vision, and now we are getting instructions we need for making life wonderful. Won’t you join me, beloved community?