

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 30, 2020

JEREMIAH 15:15-21 | PSALM 26:1-8 | ROMANS 12:9-21 | MATTHEW 16:21-28

This past Friday was the feast day of Moses the Black. Moses is kind of a funny character to have on our calendar because we really don't know that much about him aside from a few basic facts. Moses lived in Egypt around the fourth century. And he spent most of his life earning (taking?) a living as a thief. But eventually he had some kind of conversion experience, was baptized, and joined a monastic community that lived in the desert. At this point, history slides into myth.

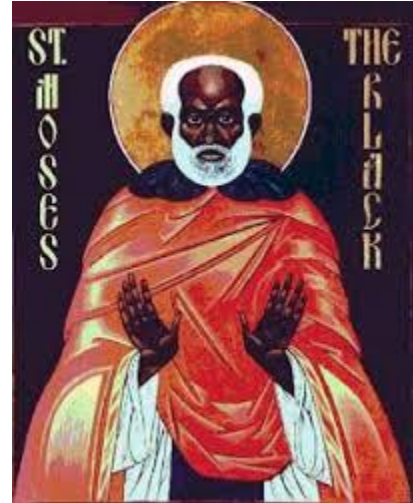
One thing we do know is how Moses died. One day, his community received word that a group of bandits, much like the group he used to belong to, was pillaging the area and would be arriving on their doorstep soon. Many of the community members argued that they should take up weapons and fight them. But Moses told them to run away, insisting that he would meet them when they arrived. He met them empty-handed, and they killed him.

While there's lots that we don't know about Moses, one thing is exceptionally clear from his life. Which is a commitment to the practice of nonviolence. When Moses confronted the thieves, he was also confronted with his past self. A version of himself that used violence to get ahead and maintain his life. And in that moment, Moses recognized that if he resorted to violence, if he turned back into his old self, he would be giving up his life.

That's part of what today's reading from Romans is all about. Last week, we talked about stories and how God gives us a new, better, truer story for us to live out of. And it was good. But it was mostly about us. How do we see ourselves? How do we understand our identity? What do we look to for meaning? And this week we broaden the scope a bit. Because if you trust in God's story, God's promises, God's identity, you're going to encounter some resistance. Today's reading feels like a grab bag of advice with no common center, but it's really a summation of how you should encounter the world if your life is centered in Christ. And according to Paul, you should encounter the world the same way Moses did in the Egyptian wilderness. Loving, open-handed, nonviolently.

In her book *Furious Hours*, Casey Cep writes, "Violence has a way of destroying everything but itself."¹ It takes away lives and futures and possibility and replaces them with more destruction. We like to think that we can use a little bit of violence and contain its effects, a drone strike here, a good guy with a gun there, but violence replicates itself. People often say that nonviolence can't possibly work in the real world, but we should be asking the question the other way around. Can violence actually work in the real world?

Paul's answer would be *No*. And so part of what Paul is doing in this reading is outlining a totally countercultural ethic for how this community of believers will live. In a society that defaults to violence, that's used to getting things done by coercion and threats, this community will live in a radically different way. And just as a note here, I'm not going to give an exhaustive account of



¹ Casey N. Cep, *Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2019), 25.

nonviolence that explains every issue in the next seven minutes, but I hope this gives you some sense of why it was so important to the witness of the early church.

There are two very common misconceptions about nonviolence that we need to keep in mind to understand what Paul is talking about. The first misconception is that violence is all about weapons and wars, armies and attacks. But Paul recognizes that isn't necessarily true. Violence is about control. Watching the past week in Kenosha, I was reminded of an event I was at a couple years ago where someone was talking about the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. And they said, "No one would have imagined that Ferguson would become a place of violence overnight." I think the people who lived there could have imagined it. Because violence doesn't start when people are shot. Violence doesn't start when buildings burn. Violence starts when we think we have to organize societies around retaliation, coercion, and exploitation. Ferguson didn't become violent in 2014. It just became violent in a way that this person cared about.²

So nonviolence is actually something every one of us can practice. We can practice nonviolence in our relationships, in our homes, in our workplaces, even in our churches.³ Paul tells us that we can practice nonviolence whenever we choose not to "repay evil for evil," not to destroy, not to tear down, but instead choose to seek constructive solutions to problems. When we show hospitality to strangers, associate with the lowly, and live peaceably with all, we are practicing nonviolence. Every one of us has opportunities to practice nonviolence every single day.

The second misconception is that nonviolence is defined by the absence of something.⁴ Sometimes we think that practicing nonviolence just makes you into a doormat for other people to walk all over. It's a way of being passive in the world and means you have to give up your rights, your identity, and your dignity. But that's not true at all. In fact, when St. Paul talks about nonviolence in today's reading, he suggests the exact opposite. That practicing nonviolence isn't ethics by omission, but it's a conscious choice and a way that we work to change other people.

Not being violent isn't the same thing as practicing nonviolence. Nonviolent practice is active. It means dialogue, reform, and protest. "Overcom[ing] evil with good," to use St. Paul's phrase, doesn't mean just ignore evil and hope it goes away. "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." It means not defeating violence with its own tactics, but actually working to change our enemies by speaking to them in a different language. After all, violence destroys everything but itself. What we seek instead is transformation.⁵

This is all fine and good, but we can actually take this a step further. Because nonviolence isn't just nice or advisable or even successful in certain circumstances, but it's actually the way the Spirit of Jesus works in and through us. In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells the disciples that his mission will end in him being crucified. Like Moses the Black, Jesus won't take up arms against those who seek to kill him but will meet them empty-handed. And Peter's response is that this Should Not Happen. In his mind, they can use a little bit of violence. A good guy with a sword. After all, a crucified messiah is a failed messiah.

² This is outlined in "Justice Department Announces Findings of Two Civil Rights Investigations in Ferguson, Missouri," March 4, 2015, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-findings-two-civil-rights-investigations-ferguson-missouri>.

³ For some perspectives on how church conflict can devolve into violence see Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 2.

⁴ A useful summary of some of this in Ezra Klein, "Imagining the Nonviolent State," *Vox*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/17/21279950/nonviolence-king-gandhi-protesters-rioters-george-floyd>.

⁵ For a good discussion of nonviolence and SNCC, see Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (Basic Books, 2008), 95.

But we know the ending of that story, too. Jesus even mentions it in today's reading. He will be raised up on the third day. That Jesus's connection with the one he calls the Father is so strong, so deep, so trusting that he won't resort to ungodly coercion or violence that seeks to control. And that by his resurrection, Jesus's practice of nonviolence, of mercy, of forgiveness is vindicated. That same Spirit that animated his life, that same relationship with the Father, is what Jesus gives all of us.

In some icons of Moses the Black, he's depicted with his hands out like this. And at first you think that he's waving or looking vaguely monastic, but then you realize that you're seeing Moses from the thieves' perspective. Stepping out to meet us empty handed, without weapons, without violence, the same way Christ meets the world that rejected him.

When we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit to stand in Jesus's place and speak his words to the Father, we stand like this as well. Open-handed, nonviolent, compassionate, in the posture of faith. Jesus tells us that we don't have to take life, only receive it.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor