Excerpt from John Dear's *The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence* (Orbis, 2024), pages 14-15, 21-23.

The Great Mountaintop Sermon on Nonviolence — Introduction

Jesus climbs the mountain, sits down with the disciples around him, and becomes the new Moses who issues a new set of commandments. Unlike those of Moses, these are not negative prohibitions but positive exhortations. Instead of "Thou shalt not . . . ," he says, "Thou shalt. . . ."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers some of the world's greatest teachings on nonviolence. He starts with the Beatitudes, then the six antitheses, then a series of teachings on nonviolence, and, finally, a few parables. These three chapters offer the solutions to every problem and issue, personally and globally, from practices for personal peace to a social, economic, and political methodology for a new future of peace. There is simply nothing else like it.

Even so, relatively few people study the Sermon on the Mount. If this is Jesus's quintessential message, then the lack of attention to it is shocking. We can debate the words of Moses, Samuel, David, and Paul inside and out, and put them on the same plane as Jesus's words, or even give them greater import than Jesus's teachings. We take the Bible as a whole, with all its images and stories of violence, as if they equal the message of Jesus. Yet we do not give equal attention to Jesus's teachings on universal love, compassion, and peace. It's as if not one church in the world aspires to embody these core principles of Jesus, as if few have ever read them.

Except for Mahatma Gandhi. He read from Matthew chapter 5 pretty much every day of his life, during his morning and evening public, one-hour meditation. For him, this was the greatest instruction on nonviolence, almost like a handbook on how to be nonviolent, how to be human. For Gandhi, it was a text worth returning to every day. It laid out the guidelines of his life.

Gandhi offers a model for every one of us. He was not a Christian, but he lived his life according to the Sermon on the Mount and let the teachings shape his decisions. He demonstrated how every Christian should be living — according to the words of Jesus, starting with the great Sermon on the Mount. I propose that Christians around the world spend thirty years studying and practicing only the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels; only then can they turn to Paul and other texts. We need to know the Sermon on the Mount inside out and try to experiment with it. Our goal should be to do what Gandhi did — to read from the Sermon on the Mount daily and let Jesus's teachings guide our day-to-day lives, determine our choices and decisions, and form us into authentic Sermon-on-the-Mount people. If we each tried to do this, we would be greatly blessed, and God's work of disarming the world could begin in earnest.

"Those Who Obey and Teach These Commandments Will Be Called the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" (5:17-20)

Then Jesus begins to explain his own place within these teachings, Judaic history, even salvation history. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place."

Here Jesus announces that his teachings are the fulfillment of all Hebrew teachings. He declares that he is fulfilling the Torah and everything the prophets taught. This, too, is critically important. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is also totally nonviolent, and that his teachings are the fulfillment of everything that came before — then we know now that the goal of life is to live these Sermon-on-the-Mount teachings. More, as we live them, study them, and teach them, we know that nonviolence is the way of God, that to be truly human is to be nonviolent, and that to follow the nonviolent Jesus is to practice, live, and teach the way of peace.

If we are to believe these verses, then we understand that the Hebrew Bible, which is the word of God, offers a slow revelation of God's nature. This has happened over a thousand years through more than a hundred authors and has gradually led to this breakthrough of divine nonviolence. The earliest books presume that God is violent like us. Then the Wisdom literature offers a change in tone, and we discover the feminine side to God. By the time of the prophets and their demand for justice for the poor, we are prepared

for a God who engages the world in the struggle for justice and peace, even though we are still not clear about nonviolence. That breakthrough into new understanding happens right here in the Sermon on the Mount.

From now on, everything needs to be read through the eyes of the nonviolent Jesus and the sermon on nonviolence. The true living God can be met only through the lens of nonviolence. Everything in the law and the prophets leads toward the nonviolent Jesus and his new law of nonviolence. The scandal of Jesus, the scandal of Christianity, is that God is nonviolent. Perhaps it's because we do not want the nonviolent God of Jesus that so many Christians prefer to study violent characters such as Samuel and David and sacred texts filled with violence such as Chronicles and Kings, or even St. Paul, who was killed before the Sermon on the Mount was written. Perhaps the greatest need among Christians worldwide is to stop reading everything except the Gospels, particularly Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, so that we can know the nonviolence of Jesus as the early church did. What we are doing is not working, but the decision to study and meditate on the Sermon on the Mount helped Gandhi, so I hope more and more of us can study this sermon of Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that came before, including the law and the prophets.

The Jewish law, the Torah, set up limits and boundaries for us. "An eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth" was a reasonable curtailment of our tendency to carry out vengeance out of proportion to the original crime. But with the coming of Jesus, those old standards are thrown out. Instead, we are summoned to the total nonviolence of God. Our new boundary is the prohibition of any violence in any proportion. When the world finally becomes nonviolent, it will seem like an entirely new world; the old world of violence will have passed away.

When the nonviolent Jesus speaks of heaven and earth passing away, he is not talking about an apocalypse of violence that will destroy everything, but rather about the fulfillment of God's reign on earth by which violence is abolished and all people can live in the freedom and peace of his total nonviolence. In light of God's nonviolence, Isaiah and the book of Revelation point to the coming of "a new heaven and a new earth," where everyone everywhere will live at peace in God's realm of nonviolence and universal love. That's why Gandhi concluded, "When the practice of nonviolence becomes universal, God will reign on earth just as God reigns in heaven."

Because Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are the new commandments of God, the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets, and the fullest revelation of the mind of God, anyone who breaks these commandments and teaches others to break them will be "the least," to put it mildly. We are to spend our lives according to these commandments and teach others to do so as well. This will earn the name "greatest" in the kingdom of heaven.

Life is a journey into God's reign of love, justice, compassion, and nonviolence. That's where we are headed. The question each of us must ask is, Do I help bring this reality to life by how I live? Or do I actually hinder the coming of God's reign here and now?

Many people want to be called great — especially religious people. We seem to do everything but teach these Sermon-on-the-Mount teachings of nonviolence, much less live by them. Yet here in black and white is the prescription for and promise of greatness. Want to be called the greatest in heaven? Great! Obey and teach every word in the Sermon on the Mount. This should become the new goal for every priest, minister, bishop, and Christian in the world.

Finally, before the six antitheses, Jesus offers a warning: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven." The scribes and the Pharisees were good, devout people who knew the Torah inside and out, fasted twice a week, and followed the law to the letter. But none of that matters, Jesus suggests, if they remain part of the status quo — a system relying on dominance, and often lacking in mercy and compassion. This warning against violent fundamentalism still holds true today. We can be the most devout, strident religious person around, yet still not enter the kingdom of heaven. We do not want to be fervently religious and end up hurting others, even supporting war, domination, and empire. The goal is to enter the kingdom of heaven and help others enter as well. We need to reject any trace of violence in our religious practice, belief, spirituality, community, and church. Jesus does not want us to be religious fundamentalists who end up serving the very culture that treats people so brutally. Jesus summons us to a deep humility and the kind of mindset that sets others free, that blesses others rather than condemns them.