I was privileged this weekend to be present at the Board of Directors of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, at a meeting just outside Philadelphia. Yesterday morning, as the meeting drew to a close, we shared worship with Pastor Doug, a Hispanic minister who serves Calvary Baptist Church, a congregation in Norristown, Pennsylvania, a working class town on the wealthy Philadelphia mainline. A few years ago, Sunday worship was down to about twenty older attendees, German and Anglo in ancestry. Today, the congregation is growing with an influx of Spanish speaking new members.

As we met for prayer, Pastor Doug first took us through the beautiful sanctuary, inviting us to walk quietly in a big room where stain glass windows dominate, full of images from the life of a very blonde looking Jesus. Then we moved to the fellowship hall—heated on Saturdays, unlike that chilly sanctuary. He proceeded to tell us about a congregation caught between the harassing, often denigrating presence of the Norristown police department and the angry militant advocacy of a group called Juntos, siding with immigrants in danger of harassment, random police checks and even deportation. Neither side in this volatile conflict is too happy with this minister or his congregation. Yet increasingly, the church is a meeting place where police and immigrant rights advocates can meet in the same room.

Pastor Doug shared one story from this ongoing time of discomfort and struggle, a story about insisting on loving the enemy. Pastor Doug had tried to question a zealous police lieutenant, who had been using the church parking lot as a staging area for traffic stops, not-so-randomly checking the papers and vehicles of the many people who drive through that busy intersection. When they spoke, the lieutenant refused to believe that Doug was the pastor of the church. In the days following the confrontation, police cars started routinely to take their break time in the parking lot of the church. A cruiser showed up and parked every time activities serving the immigrant community were gathering. In particular, ESL classes—English as second language classes—were blessed with the intimidating presence of a cruiser parked near the door where students entered, sending a very clear and intimidating message: “We are watching you.” How to respond?

Overwhelm them with love, was the pastor’s response. Love them so much they would have to respond, one way or another. He asked participants in the class, every one, to go up to the police cruiser, to introduce themselves to the officer inside and thank them for their work. Sure enough, the participants started to do this, walking up to the cruiser, approaching the window to introduce themselves to the officers. Soon, lines were forming in the parking lot, as every participant, one by one, went politely to greet the officers parked there. Strangely, within a short time, the police cars started to take their breaks elsewhere, or at a different time.

Pastor Doug and his congregation, a congregation made up from people from different sides of the deeply divided community of Norristown, are refusing to take sides. But they are also refusing to
back down and disappear, or retreat in fear, or strike back in kind. This is what it means to turn the other cheek. This is what it means to respond to the threat of violence, with pre-emptive acts of Peace.

II.

In the earliest generations of the church, it was almost universally accepted, both by Christians and by their opponents, that two things set Christians apart: One was their unwillingness to strike back in hatred. The other was their refusal to back off, back down. Christianity was a counter-cultural religion that practiced nonviolence resistance in the most real ways you can imagine. This wasn’t easy. But people had decided to live the way of the cross of Jesus, rather than under assumptions of the sword of Caesar. They knew, to paraphrase today’s lesson from Matthew’s gospel, that any one who chose to live like Christ could expect to suffer like Christ, the natural consequences of the struggle to turn the tides of war and oppression. They knew they had to be ready to stand up for what they believed: not by lashing out in retaliation, but by being ready to suffer willingly as a public witness for the truth as they knew it. To put it in today’s terms, they needed to be willing to stand up politely to the officer on the corner, refuse to disappear, refuse to be dehumanized, and respond with integrity and love, when the inevitable happened.

A few years have passed since then! There is a lot of water over the dam in Christianity. One of the first bits of that early Christianity to float off was the clear understanding that the way of the cross is quite different than the way of the sword. The idea that a Christian should be ready to take blows while standing up for her or his convictions, without backing off—such ideas weren’t good marketing. Heck, they hadn’t even been popular with the disciples when Jesus first brought them up. They were surely not attractive to people like the Emperor Constantine, with dreams of uniting the empire militarily and politically under a banner carrying symbol of Roman oppression: the cross. In the middle ages in Europe, Christianity was the religion of tyrants as well as saints. In reformation times, both Protestants and Catholics wielded two fisted swords—on each other and on others. By modern times, the nonviolence of the message of Jesus had been demoted to an impossible ideal, aside from nuns, monks, Quakers and Mennonites. Even if we were still a touch uncomfortable with the notion of gun-toting clergy.

In fact it took until the first part of the twentieth century for someone—a Hindu and not a Christian—to recover the way in which Christ’s path was a path of deliberate and powerful noncooperation. Mohandas Gandhi, starting with a campaign in South Africa and then moving it to India, came to appreciate and appropriate the techniques of Jesus—not as a passive surrender to evil, but as a method for confronting systematic oppression and injustice with truth—and overcoming brute force with soul force. And he turned it from an individual path of discipleship, into a methodology for mass action, rooted in the power of love.

In our country, it took an African American Baptist minister from Atlanta, Georgia in the late nineteen fifties to bring home the point to American Christians, that whatever his theological questions and doubts, the nonviolent way of the cross had some promise, some potential, some truth. It was the way to go, practically speaking when it came to working for freedom for all people in this nation, and throughout the world.

Martin Luther King Junior was not the first or the only Christian to see the teachings of Jesus, the way of the cross, in this light. Leo Tolstoy saw it. Dorothy Day saw it. Howard Thurman had gone to visit Gandhi in India. King was not the first one to appreciate the ways in which Gandhi got Jesus
right, while the churches missed the boat. But he was the one who somehow managed to confront the soul of the American churches with the searing challenge of Matthew’s Gospel, challenging us to an alternative path to our usual ways of doing business.

III.

We need to confront the question: What would it mean to REALLY follow Jesus, not only in our hearts but also with our bodies and our minds? What would it mean to ask our prayers and our practices, our principles and our daily deeds, to pull in the same direction? What would it mean to embrace the way of nonviolence, what would it mean to take up our crosses and follow Jesus?

The earliest disciples would have told us something like this: If we really try to follow the teachings of Jesus, it means living peaceably with all people, even when we know they are trying to hurt us. Now that doesn’t mean living passively. It doesn’t mean being a sheep. It doesn’t mean allowing ourselves to be overcome by evil, cooperate with abuse. Instead it means looking for creative ways, good ways, to overcome the evil, rather than piling evil on evil, rather than reacting to violence and repaying it in kind. They would invite us to respond to a world of threats and intimidation by standing up and insisting on human dignity and truth.

Embracing the Jesus way of nonviolence is not a matter of being purer or better than other people are. Some folks seem to think that to be nonviolent is to live a perfect and passive life. But this methodology is for people like you and me, and it is about anything but passivity. Embracing this way of living is not about ever being able to get it all right, have all the answers. It is about a set of questions that we need to examine in our souls. It is about starting every day, beginning every day, as an adventure that will change us, and may change our neighbors as well.

Whether we are homemakers, students or businesspeople, politicians, retirees or nurses, every day we confront situations in which we must choose whether to repay evil with evil, or try to overcome it with good. Every day we confront situations in which we could stay silent in the face of unfairness or injustice…or we could speak up gently and firmly, and risk being put down, ostracized or even hurt. Every day we must decide what to see and what not to see, what to say and what not to say, when to bless and when to say no. You and I. And all I am trying to suggest is that the full unvarnished life of the follower of Jesus is at some deep level a pilgrimage of deliberate and sometimes outrageous nonviolence.

Learning to live in the way of Christ is a pilgrimage, a journey, a process of learning and growing. We do not get there all at once! It is a path of prayer, it is a path made up of little moments, little experiments with love. It is a path that leads almost inevitably to suffering along the way. But it is also a path that leads to joy and discovery without limitation. It offers the opportunity for pre-emptive acts of peace; it can lead us to new friendships in the most unlikely places! And let us be honest with ourselves and the world. Two thousand years later, it is a path we still don’t know much about.

Two thousand years ago, a Galilean rabbi started an experiment. He offered his own life to the cause, in a series of pre-emptive acts of peace. Let’s do some more research. With our lives.