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A Primer on Self Affirming, Nonviolence (Part 4)

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“We’ve been discussing the importance of listening to those on the margins of society and their experiences and wisdom. What follows is a result of doing just that in the context of the subject of nonviolence.”

by Herb Montgomery

Before we begin, I want to pause for a moment and ask for your support. Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to bring the kind of resources and analysis that RHM provides.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever.

Help Christians be better humans.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to Renewed Heart Ministries, today. To do so just go to our website at renewedheartministries.com and click “Donate” on the top right or if you prefer to make a donation by mail, our address is:

Renewed Heart Ministries
PO Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

And to those of you out there who already are supporting this ministry, I want to say thank you. We could not continue being a voice for change without your support.

Over on our Social Jesus blog, we’ve been discussing the importance of listening to those on the margins of society and their experiences and wisdom. What follows is a result of doing just that in the context of the subject of nonviolence.

So far in this series, we have discussed both nonviolence and resistance. It’s now time to address the difference between nonviolence as self-sacrificial and nonviolence as self-affirming.

Historically, certain forms of nonviolence have tended to drift into victims passively enduring suffering to redeem their oppressors. This is why we must take a moment to clarify the differences between self-affirming nonviolence and the myth of nonviolent, redemptive suffering. Other scholars’ work will help us understand.

Drs. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in their book *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*:

“Notice, above all, how repeatedly Mark has Jesus insist that Peter, James and John, the Twelve, and all his followers on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem must pass with him through death to a resurrected life whose content and style was spelled out relentlessly against their refusals to accept it. For Mark, it is about participation with Jesus and not substitution by Jesus. Mark has those followers recognize enough of that challenge that they change the subject and avoid the issue every time.” (Borg, Marcus J., and John Dominic. Crossan. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* [2007], p. 102.)

Mark’s Jesus speaks of the cross as participatory rather than as substitution. At this point of the story, it was something Jesus invited his disciples to join him in. We must ask ourselves what this means for other Jesus followers in other times and places.

Jesus’s teachings on nonviolence in the sermon on the mount were forms of nonviolent resistance through which his fellow oppressed could stand up

to the dehumanizing attempts of their oppressors. They were nonviolent forms of resistance and self-affirmation.

But what we see in the story is Jesus’ suffering of his cross can be interpreted as a passive lack of resistance. If this proves a valid interpretation, then his instruction in the Sermon on the Mount would be distinct from the lack of resistance we see at the cross. His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and interpreting Jesus’ actions surrounding the cross event as being passive have been conflated to produce harm.

How many domestic violence survivors have had the cross of Jesus and his “patient endurance of suffering” held up to them as something they should emulate? They have been told to “take up their cross” and simply endure: it’s a dangerous situation where they are deemed “Christlike” as they endure abuse for the redemption of their spouse. They are told that this is what it means to follow Jesus’s “example.” So how do we harmonize what he taught and what he did?

Let’s back up and unpack what led up to Jesus’s cross in the story.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the cross is the direct backlash of the elite class in power to Jesus’ protest in the Temple where he overturned the tables and drove out the livestock. Jesus was not “patiently enduring suffering” in his Temple protest. He was resisting. He was protesting. He was shutting it down. And, ultimately, the cross was the result of his resistance. A cross is not the first act of violence that oppressors inflict on the

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oppressed that we simply must endure. The cross is a secondary act of violence that oppressors impose on the oppressed for standing up to the primary violence. Consider the following chronologies.

Myth of Redemptive Suffering vs. Self-affirming Nonviolence

Within the myth of redemptive suffering the recommended chronology of events is:

1. Initial Oppression
2. Our “bearing our cross” which is defined as a patient, passive endurance for the redemption of the violent

Within an interpretation of Jesus teachings as self-affirming nonviolence the chronology of events would be:

1. Oppression
2. Resistance even though there may be a backlash
3. The cross is defined as the violence that is threatened by those in power if one does stand up.
4. The cross is the backlash that must be risked rather than avoided through passive acceptance of initial oppression.

Self-affirming nonviolence is quite different from redemptive suffering.

Self-affirming nonviolence is the call to stand up to oppression. Remember Barbara Deming’s statement about the two hands, one held up and one outstretched.

“With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, ‘Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life.’ But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised outstretched – maybe with love and sympathy, maybe not – but always outstretched...With this hand we say, ‘I won’t let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I’ll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of

one another.’” (*Revolution & Equilibrium*. Grossman, 1971. Page 224.)

The cross was the violence that people in power used to threaten those considering standing up to their oppressors. Taking up one’s cross in self-affirming nonviolence is not patient, passive endurance of suffering but the choice to resist and stand up against oppression even if one is threatened with a cross for doing so.

Feminist and womanist scholars criticize theology that equates the cross with patient, passive, endurance of oppression and violence:



Photo by Keem Ibarra on Unsplash

“Christian theology has long imposed upon women a norm of imitative self-sacrifice based on the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Powerlessness is equated with faithfulness. When the cross is also interpreted as the salvific work of an all-powerful paternal deity, women’s well being is as secure as that of a child cowering before an abusive father.” (Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* [1989] p. xii)

“The problem with this theology is that it asks people to suffer for the sake of helping evildoers see their evil ways. It puts concern for the evildoers ahead of concern for the victim of evil. It makes victims the servants of the evildoers’ salvation.” (*Ibid.* p. 20)

“In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy.” (Delores S. Williams and Katie G. Cannon, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* [2013], p. 127)

The Rev. Drs. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker make an important distinction between the myth of redemptive suffering and choosing life in spite of suffering that may be threatened as a result:

“It is not the acceptance of suffering that gives life; it is commitment to life that gives life. The question, moreover, is not Am I willing to suffer? but Do I desire fully to live? This distinction is subtle and, to some, specious, but in the end it makes a great difference in how people interpret and respond to suffering.” (Brown & Parker, p. 18)

Yes, there are subtle distinctions between defining “taking up one’s cross” as passively enduring oppression and defining it as being willing to stand up and resist even if there are those who threaten you with a cross. But how we define Jesus’s call to take up our cross makes all the difference in how we respond to oppression, violence, and injustice. Does taking up the cross mean remaining passive? Or does it mean not letting our oppressors threaten us into remaining passive?

Lastly, the cross is not universally intrinsic to following Jesus, as some would have us believe. It only comes into the picture if one’s oppressors use it as a threat to try to force us to remain passive. The cross is only present if oppressors make it present, and only if the oppressed choose to resist and stand up in spite of being threatened. If those in power do threaten you with a cross for following Jesus and standing up to oppression, then following Jesus involves the cross for you. The cross is secondary and not universal; it is not primary or intrinsic to following Jesus for all.

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It's time for our second annual *A Shared Table: A Fundraiser for Renewed Heart Ministries!*

In the gospels Jesus modeled for us a way of practicing community in the shape of a shared table. With a preferential option for the most vulnerable among us, this way of living is rooted in a posture of caring and listening. We believe the result will be a world that becomes a safer, just, more compassionate home for everyone. These pottery bowls are a symbol of Jesus' shared table.

You can use this pottery bowl and be reminded of the shared table as a means of healing the hurts in our world. Or you could simply place it on your side table or work desk as a conversation starter. When asked about it you can share with

them Jesus' shared table, and even direct them to RHM to find out more. That way you can partner with us in even more ways to spread the message of love, compassion, justice, sharing and taking care of one another.

To get your own *RHM Shared Table Pottery Bowl* (made by Crystal and myself) all you have to do is become one of our sustaining partners by setting up an automated reoccurring monthly donation on our website during the months of November or December.

To do this go to renewedheartministries.com/donate/. There's no minimum amount. And of course, you can pledge as much as you'd like, as well. Just make sure you select "Check this box to make it a monthly recurring donation", or if you are using Paypal, check "Make

this a monthly donation." These types of subscriptions sustain our work throughout the year and allow us to make ministry plans for 2020.

And if you are already one of our sustaining partners making a monthly automated donation each month, you don't have to do a thing. We want to honor your existing continual support of Renewed Heart Ministries.

At the end of December we'll send you one of RHM's Shared Table Pottery Bowls so you can join in sharing the message of a shared table, too.

Thank you in advance for your support. Now you'll be able to help us even more by putting your *RHM Shared Table Pottery Bowl* on display, and when the conversation comes up, tell folks all about Jesus' vision for a world shaped in the form of a shared table and send them our direction to find out more.

Crystal and I are so excited to be offering these bowls again this year as a visual representation of a safer, more compassionate, and just world. We, here at RHM, believe that following Jesus creates such a world.

Get your *Shared Table Pottery Bowl* today by going to: renewedheartministries.com/donate.

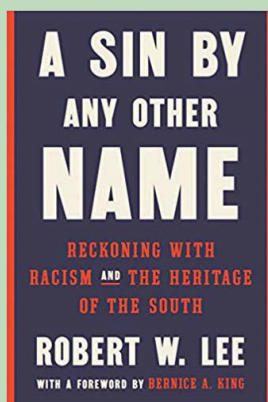
Book of the Month for October 2019

A Sin by Any Other Name: Reckoning with Racism and the Heritage of the South

by Robert W. Lee (Author), Bernice A. King (Foreword)

A descendant of Confederate General Robert E. Lee chronicles his story of growing up with the South's most honored name, and the moments that forced him to confront the privilege, racism, and subversion of human dignity that came with it.

The Reverend Robert W. Lee was a little-known pastor at a small church in



the country, but so did threats of violence from people who opposed the Reverend's message.

In this riveting memoir, he narrates what it was like growing up as a Lee in the South, an experience that was colored by the world of the white Christian majority. He describes the

North Carolina until the Charlottesville protests, when he went public with his denunciation of white supremacy in a captivating speech at the MTV Video Music Awards. Support poured in from around

widespread nostalgia for the Lost Cause and his gradual awakening to the unspoken assumptions of white supremacy which had, almost without him knowing it, distorted his values and even his Christian faith. In particular, Lee examines how many white Christians continue to be complicit in a culture of racism and injustice, and how after leaving his pulpit, he was welcomed into a growing movement of activists all across the South who are charting a new course for the region.

***A Sin by Any Other Name* is a love letter to the South, from the South, by a Lee—and an unforgettable call for change and renewal.**

[If you order this book through amazon.com, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.]

This leads us to discern what the teachings of a 1st Century Jewish prophet of the poor may offer us today in our contemporary work of survival, resistance, liberation, reparation, and transformation. It's not the cross that transforms society. Following the teachings of Jesus and standing up to injustice transforms society. So it is not the cross of Jesus that "saves" us societally, but following Jesus saves societally us by placing us on a different path with different intrinsic results. It is, as Brown and Parker state, not the acceptance of suffering that brings life, but the determination to choose life that brings life. Jesus didn't die so the elite in the status quo could go to heaven at death. Jesus died because he stood up to the status quo in solidarity with the oppressed in spite of being threatened with death for doing so.

In this series on nonviolence, we must head the caution that the Rev. Dr. Katie G. Cannon gave us: nonviolence should not be interpreted as passivity, redemptive suffering, or societal disengagement:

"[Delores Williams] contends that theologians need to think seriously about the real-life consequences of redemptive suffering, God-talk that equates the acceptance of pain, misery, and abuse as the way for true believers to live as authentic Christian disciples. Those who spew such false teaching and warped preaching must cease and desist." (Delores S. Williams and Katie G. Cannon, *Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* [2013], *Foreword*)

Williams goes on to quote the scholars we referenced this week, who critique Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. allowing his own nonviolence to drift into forms of redemptive suffering:

"Their critique of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of the value of the suffering of the oppressed in oppressed-oppressor confrontations accords with my assumption that African-American Christian women can, through their religion and its leaders, be led passively to accept their own oppression and suffering—if the women are taught that suffering is redemptive. Brown and Parker quote Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words about suffering which he saw as a most creative and powerful social force.... The

non-violent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you willingly accept that violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the non-violent movement and the individuals involved are able to suffer in a creative manner, feeling that unearned suffering is redemptive and that suffering may serve to transform the social situation. Brown and Parker's critique of this theology 'is that it asks people to suffer for the sake of helping evildoers see their evil ways. It puts concern for the evildoers ahead of concern for the victim of evil. It makes victims the servants of the evildoers' salvation.'" (*Ibid.* p. 161.)

One of King's most famous sermons drifts into the myth of redemptive suffering or nonviolence defined as self-sacrifice of the oppressed rather than self-affirmation:

"I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: 'We shall 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 and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, but we'll still love you. But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'" (in Martin Luther King, *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings* [2012], p. 54)

There is a subtle difference between the above passage and the passage we read

previously from Barbara Deming. Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount did not call his followers to passively respond to suffering but to stand up to injustices in nonviolent forms of resistance.

Both feminist and womanist authors warn of defining Jesus' cross (when interpreted as passive acceptance) rather than his teachings as the centerpiece of our nonviolence. Again the cross did not demonstrate Jesus' nonviolence. It was the backlash for Jesus' previous nonviolent resistance.

Consider Delores Williams' words, one more time:

"It seems more intelligent and more scriptural to understand that redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life. Redemption had to do with God, through the ministerial vision, giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life. Hence, the kingdom of God theme in the ministerial vision of Jesus does not point to death; it is not something one has to die to reach. Rather, the kingdom of God is a metaphor of hope God gives those attempting to right the relations between self and self, between self and others, between self and God as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else." (Delores S. Williams and Katie G. Cannon, *Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* [2013], p. 130-131)

As we close, let's revisit Elizabeth Bettenhausen's account of a conversation with a group of seminarians. It gives us much to ponder about whether Jesus' nonviolence was rooted in the self-affirmation of the oppressed found in the instruction in the Sermon on the Mount or should be defined as the oppressed's self-sacrifice—their cross:

"Several years ago I asked a group of seminarians to choose New Testament stories about Jesus and rewrite them imagining that Jesus had been female. The following recreation of the passion story of Luke 22:54-65 was one woman's knowing by heart.

'They arrested the Christ woman and led

RHM's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/



Worshiping Jesus Versus Following Jesus

"It is far easier to talk about Jesus than the things Jesus talked about. Why? Because what Jesus talked about has the potential to change our world."

Read more at: patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2019/09/worshiping-jesus-versus-following-jesus/



The Wrong Messiah

"Today, Evangelical Christianity has lost its witness, and it is no longer credible in matters of compassion."

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2019/09/wrong-messiah/



A Warning for Our Present Moment

"Our passage above is a warning for times like right now. It is a warning against failing to recognize what genuinely brings hope to a society or community and what has the potential to destroy a society or community altogether."

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2019/09/warning-present-moment/



Photo by Priscilla du Preez on Unsplash

Make your support of RHM go twice as far!

November and December are traditionally months within our year for gratitude and thankfulness to be expressed. This year, a group of our supporters want to express their gratitude for RHM once again in a concrete and tangible way.

"I believe in the work RHM is doing, and we want to make sure this work continues."

These were the words of one of these very kind and generous supporters whom I spoke with on the phone recently. They wish to remain anonymous, and they have together pledged to match every donation during the month of November made to Renewed Heart Ministries, dollar for dollar, up to \$40,000.

Seeing in our monthly newsletter *Awakenings* that RHM was facing a potential budget shortfall this year, they not only wanted to help, they want to see us *grow*.

What does all of this mean for you as someone who is *also* a supporter

and partner with RHM? It means that for the months of November and December, you can make your support go **twice as far**.

Thanks to this generous offer, every dollar you give to Renewed Heart Ministries during November and December, will be doubled!

Here at the end of 2019 you can make your support of RHM's work go further than it does at any other time of the year!

Help us reach our budget goals for 2019 and be able to plan for 2020. For those of you who will also sign up to be one of our automated donors during our second annual *A Shared Table: A Fundraiser for Renewed Heart Ministries*, your contributions for November and December will also be matched.

We are beyond thankful for all of our supporters who believe in our work and partner with us to continue being a voice for change both within the church and in our larger society!

Thank you in advance for taking advantage of these very generous offers for RHM.

Make a contribution today.

Every amount helps.

Together we are making a difference.

Another word is possible if we choose it.

2019 Full Year Budget Goal:
\$185,000.00

January-August Budget Goal:
\$123,336.00

**January-August
Contributions Received:**
\$57,358.85

August's Contributions Goal:
\$15,417.00

August Contributions Received:
\$6,147.56

Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to bring the kind of resources and analysis RHM provides.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever.

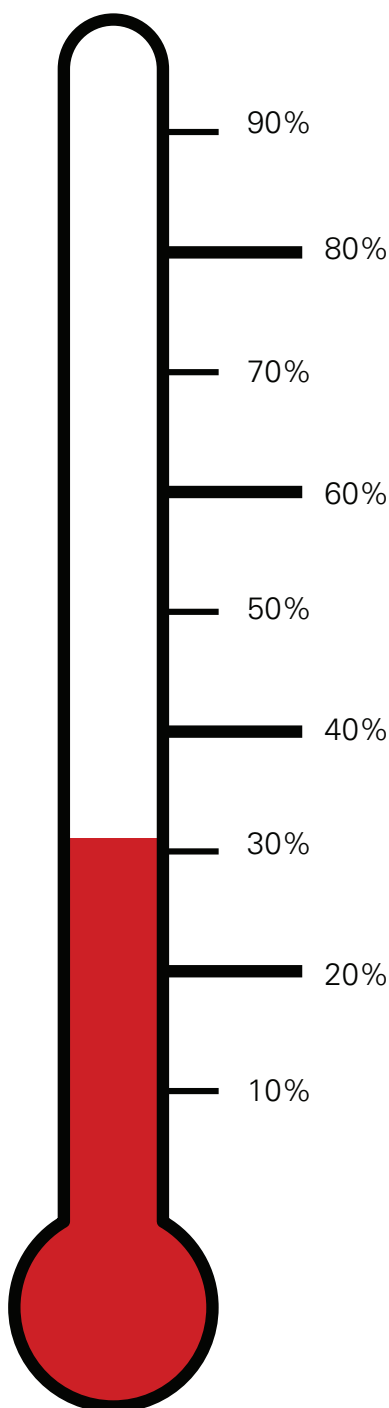
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To do so online go to renewedheartministries.com and click "Donate." Or if you prefer to make a donation by mail, our address is:

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Lewisburg, WV 24901

And to those of you out there who are already supporting this ministry, I want to say thank you. We could not continue being a voice for change without your support.

**Whether you give \$5 or \$5,000,
every amount helps us continue our work.**



...Nonviolence continued from page 5

her away to the Council for questioning. Some of her followers straggled along to find out what was to become of her. There were seven women and two men followers. (The men followers were there mainly to keep watch over their sisters.) Someone from among the crowd asked a question of a man follower, "Haven't I seen you with this woman? Who is she, and what is your relationship with her?" He replied defensively, "She is a prostitute, she has had many men. I have seen her with many!" The men who were guarding the Christ [woman] slapped her around and made fun of her. They told her to use magic powers to stop them. They blindfolded her and each them in turn raped her and afterward jeered, "Now, prophetess, who was in you? Which one of us? Tell us that!" They continued to insult her.' (Kandice Joyce)

After this story was read aloud, a silence surrounded the class and made us shiver. Ever since, I have wondered Would women ever imagine forming a religion around the rape of a woman? Would we ever conjure gang-rape as a salvific event for other women? What sort of god would such an event reveal?" (in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* [1989], p. xi-xii)

Again, the cross was the result of Jesus' refusal to let go of his hold on life and the lives of those he stood in solidarity with in the face of the oppression, violence, and injustice of his day. The cross proves Jesus was not content to remain passive and politically disengaged. We have seen in this series that Jesus' teachings on nonviolent resistance was a means of marginalized groups affirming their selves, their humanity, and the value of their lives. It was not more than resistance. It was more than nonviolent. It was nonviolent resistance that at its heart was an act of self affirmation. ■

Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
Renewed Heart Ministries
P.O. Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

Anything we receive over and above our annual budget we happily give away to other not-for-profits who are making both personal, systemic and structural differences in the lives of people who are less privileged.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

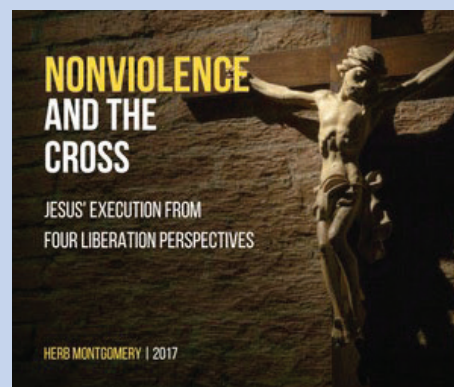
Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

RENEWED
HEART
MINISTRIES



Featured Presentation

This month, we wrap up our ten-part eSight/podcast series on Jesus' teachings on self-affirming, nonviolent resistance. In the spirit of this series, we are featuring the second presentation from our Nonviolence and the Cross audio presentation series—*What If Jesus Had Been a Woman?* Repeatedly, scholars have shown the damage, the destructive fruit of interpreting Jesus' non-violence as self-sacrificial for those who are already vulnerable in both personal and societal relationships of power inequity. We at RHM believe Jesus' nonviolence is most life-giving when it's understood



as a means of self-affirmation for those whose self is already being denied through injustice or violation. It's our hope that your heart will be renewed and your feet set in motion to follow Jesus more deeply from listening to this month's featured presentation:

What If Jesus Had Been a Woman? by Herb Montgomery.

"WE NEED IN EVERY
COMMUNITY A
GROUP OF ANGELIC
TROUBLEMAKERS."

Bayard Rustin

RenewedHeartMinistries.com

