This week’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount immediately follows last week’s which consisted of a series of sayings which begin with, “You have heard that it was said, …” “But I say to you, …” These last two of the six antithetical statements are, for many, the most difficult of all to live by. … And Jesus is commanding us to live in a very countercultural way. Recall that Jesus begins this series of statements by making the point that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Like last week’s excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount he is moving the focus from the wrongful behavior that constitutes sin, to the attitudes and judgments in the heart that precede our wrongful action. Jesus understands that the root of evil is what we harbor in our minds, and it is what we think about others that often lead to the broken relationship we call sin.
We live in a time where justifiable homicide is accepted as normal behavior and is seen as the solution to many of our problems. If our person is attacked, we can pull out a concealed weapon and kill our assailant and call it self-defense. If our country is threatened we can destroy the other nation and call it a just war. If a murderer is captured he can be tried, sentenced to death, and executed and we call it justice. If we conceive an unwanted child, we can have an abortion and call it a choice. If we are chronically or terminally ill and are suffering, we can commit suicide and call it euthanasia. If people are fleeing war, or persecution, or famine we can cut off their means of escape and call it protecting our sovereignty.

Jesus’ words from today’s Gospel are no less radical today as when he spoke them 1984 years ago. If the President of the United States were to command the military not take action against ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) he would be impeached and possibly tried for treason.

So how are we to understand Jesus’ command to, “offer no resistance to one who is evil.” This may sound as if Jesus is asking for passive resignation or even indifference to evil. Surely this is not the case any more than when Jesus went to Jerusalem to challenge those in power and then offer no resistance to his, arrest, sentencing and execution. Just as Jesus lived out his mission of speaking truth to the powerful in a nonviolent way, he also commands us to stand for the truth – “letting our yes mean yes, and our no mean no.” (Matthew 5:37) The goal is to allow the truth to stand for itself and let our nonviolent actions shame the opponent into a change of heart. This type of moral resistance was exactly the approach used by Mahatma Gandhi (1940’s) and Martin Luther King (1960’s). The end results of their efforts changed history forever in the direction of greater justice for all.

As if to underline this very difficult stance of nonviolence in the face of evil, Jesus also commands that we love our enemies. I spent 22 years in the Air Force and so, as you can imagine, I feel a bit hypocritical, preaching the love of enemies. My job description as defined by Carl von Clausewitz, as an officer, was a manager of violence. But I must preach peace if I am to call myself a disciple of Christ, the Prince of Peace. My stance on this point came after months and years of soul searching and a very troubling week in the desert back in 2002. In the end, it was not something I chose; I would have preferred to stay comfortable in my hawkish stance – My father fought in WWII and my two older brothers fought in the Viet Nam War. It is important to point out, as stated above, Jesus was not a pacifist, and He was non-violent. If Jesus had been a pacifist, he would have listened to Peter and not gone to Jerusalem. (Matthew16: 22-23) Instead, Jesus went to Jerusalem and spoke truth to power. What results of his actions are displayed on every crucifix, the impact is the greatest gift of grace ever bestowed by God.

So how are we able to take this very courageous stance for truth? The answer is presented in today’s excerpt from Paul’s letter in the form of a question. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16) And how is this Spirit to dwell in us? Well… this is the point of our celebration of the Holy Eucharist – in a few minutes we will consume the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. We will literally eat God and we will become what we eat so we can live out the very life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If we but obey…