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SENTINEL WATCH:

A POWERFUL SPIRITUAL ANSWER TO EXTREMISM

RECENT SHOOTINGS in the United States give rise to concern about an increasing tide of extremism in resolving intensely held opinions (see *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2009). Among them, an anti-abortionist in Kansas shot a well-known abortion doctor; a recent American convert to Islam took the lives of two soldiers on leave in Arkansas; and a white supremacist killed a black security guard in Washington DC's Holocaust Museum.

The heinous acts themselves are indefensible in a civil society. But perhaps the more salient issue revolves around how individuals get to the point in their deeply held convictions that allows them to breach the limits of acceptable behavior and rational thought. Care in these instances is being given not to characterize the perpetrators as representative of the views of those who might have valid concerns about the broader issues involved. Certainly hate, racism, prejudice, and intolerance can never find justification in rational discourse, but sometimes the issues of extreme self-interest and partisan or philosophical concern lie just below those insufferable states of thought. When we can no longer have civil discussion, without anger or frustration, about some of the more divisive issues that challenge us politically and socially, just how far away are we from the unjustifiable?

Many have rightly called for more tolerance, patience, and understanding of points of view that may seem irreconcilable. Sometimes there might be no obvious compromise, given people's historical, philosophical, religious, political, or sociological makeup. And sometimes human debate reaches the point where the issue can no longer be right versus wrong, but perhaps right versus right—meaning that both sides of the argument have defensible points of perspective. What then?

In those instances we may need to lift the issue to an entirely different plane of reasoning. Centuries ago, Jesus was asked to resolve an apparently irreconcilable political question of where one's allegiance in his country should lie—to the politically constituted authority of Rome, or to the more indigenous loyalties of Israel? Rather than try astutely to maneuver through the arguments of merit on both sides of this issue, he chose to direct thought to a higher perspective. Holding up a coin to the questioner, Jesus asked whose image was on the

coin. "Cæsar's" was the answer. And Jesus brought home the point: "Then give to Cæsar what is Cæsar's, and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25, New International Version).

Why was that an answer? Because Jesus chose to focus on the real issue behind the question—where is true authority in one's life, and to whom should we pay allegiance in the things that deeply affect our lives? He was helping the questioner realize that ultimately his freedom was not going to come from a political solution but from a spiritual perspective and allegiance. Perhaps the questioner was thinking of freedom from what he felt was the oppression of occupying military forces. Jesus expanded his consideration of freedom to all the limiting issues of materiality that try to enslave us. Ultimately, one's freedom of thought, right of moral determination, safety from oppression, economic stability, and dependable healthcare will not be found in entities outside oneself but in one's allegiance to God, because these are things that belong to God.

Over the centuries people of all races and societies have found inspiration and insight to resolve such matters by turning to God as the divine Mind and intelligence, as the real authority in their lives. Frequently this turning to a spiritual perspective has brought new avenues of thought that in turn have crafted a heretofore unconsidered option for resolution. Prayer is not merely a mental pacifier to get us over rough places in human experience. More than that, it's a dynamic of thought that offers resolution by impelling us to consider broader and higher mental realms that emphasize loftier principles and modes of behavior.

Jesus provided an entire discourse on such realms of thought and action in what has since been called his Sermon on the Mount (see Matt., chaps. 5, 6, and 7). Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of this magazine, once wrote on the importance of this sermon: "Every man and woman should be to-day a law to himself, herself,—a law of loyalty to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount" (*Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896*, p. 12). If one is feeling frustration in the extreme in any avenue of life, this sermon is a crucial read. Its sentiments speak to a tenor of thought and action that uplifts lives, gives higher ethics, counteracts the false tendencies of extremism, and puts us on the path to resolution of some of the seemingly intransigent challenges in human experience. **ISS**