

“The Creative Weapon of Love” – 2/19/17
Matthew 5:38-48

Well, Jesus is at it again. We heard him say some pretty outrageous things last week, if you remember. Honestly, he’s been controversial, outrageous, and unexpected throughout the entire Sermon on the Mount thus far. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, do you remember, and “blessed are the meek”? We Presbyterians may like to do things “decently and in order”, as we say, but I think it’s safe to say that was not Jesus’ standard mode of operation.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus offers us two more re-interpretations of the Law of Moses. Just like in last week’s reading, Jesus begins with, “You have heard that it was said” and cites a piece of the Jewish law. But then he continues “But I say to you…” and takes the teaching even further, looking for the deepest intention and meaning of that Law.

The first law that Jesus heard interpret today is one that I imagine is familiar to most if not all of us. It’s the law of equal retaliation, shared by several ancient civilizations. “You have heard that it was said ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’” And what’s interesting is that while this law may initially sound brutal to those of us who are not accustomed to gouging out one another’s eyes, it actually served as a force of moderation. Scholars say that the intent of this law, ‘an eye for an eye’ was to put a limit on excessive, unrestrained force and violence in personal revenge, where someone who loses an eye in a fight is so enraged that he retaliates by murdering his opponent’s entire family. In effect, the law is saying, “An eye for an eye, but *only* an eye.”

This law was intended to restore balance in relationships – even in retaliation – in a world too often governed by raw power. And to be honest, this law of equal retaliation might not be such a bad rule against which to check our actions today. Think about it for a second. How often, when nations go to war, do they say, “We will kill only as many of their people as they killed of ours”? Or in our personal lives, when we hear that someone has said something unkind about us behind our backs, don’t we, too, often respond disproportionately? “Well, I’m never going to talk to them again!” Really? Is that really the action warranted?

It’s an interesting thought, at least I think it is, but really, Jesus renders it irrelevant because he takes the law deeper, discards this law of equal retaliation, and says, “But I tell you, do not retaliate…at all. If someone hits on your right cheek, turn and offer them your left. If they sue you for your coat, give them your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile with them, go with them two.”

I would imagine that the crowds surrounding Jesus were pretty shocked. Turn the other cheek? Seriously, Jesus? Remember, these folks were living under the occupation of the Roman Empire. This was not a hypothetical situation for them at all, they were *used* to being struck. I can almost hear the crowds saying, incredulously, “Jesus, if we turn the other cheek, we are going to get hit again and again, until we are black and blue and bleeding.”

For many of us today, this is not a hypothetical situation, either. These are real strikes, and punches, and blows, and household items hurled across the room in an angry or drunken rage.

Many of you have told me about the high rates of domestic violence and abuse in Taos. I imagine many of us sitting here today have experienced some sort of abuse in one form or another – physical, sexual, verbal, psychological – or know someone who has.

And so again, as with last week’s text, I want to be clear about what I don’t think Jesus is saying. “Turn the other cheek” is *not* a divine command to tolerate abuse. After all, Scripture teaches us that we are created in the image of God, every one of us. We heard in our text this

morning from First Corinthians that our bodies are God's own Temple, that the Holy Spirit dwells within us.

God does not desire harm for any person created in his, in *her* image. Whether that person is a saint or a sinner, a friend or an enemy, or you or me. So just as Christ's heart breaks when we respond to violence with violence and strike back against an aggressor, so also does Christ's heart break to see his children bear abuse, violation, oppression, and simply accept, often out fear of upsetting the abuser.

So hear me loud and clear: This text is not calling us to be Christian doormats, to simply let what happens happen, especially, when that means letting our bodies or our spirits be beaten and broken by someone whose own rage or cruelty has blinded them to their image of God in us, to the fact that our bodies – and even theirs – are temples of the living God.

There is a theologian and Biblical scholar named Walter Wink who looks at Jesus' teachings in our text today and offers a different interpretation than the doormat reading. It's an interpretation that I find particularly compelling. When Walter Wink reads this part of the Sermon on the Mount, he hears Jesus advocating what he calls "The Third Way." A way that is neither fight nor flight, neither retaliation nor passive acceptance of abuse and harm. Wink says that, Jesus is calling us to be creative, in our response, even our resistance, to violence and evil. And to do so, Jesus gives his disciples – and us today – a creative weapon, of sorts. He gives us the creative weapon...of love.

In order to see this Third Way, this call to "creative loving resistance", we need to look at the three specific examples Jesus gives. And to remember, of course, that Jesus is addressing these teachings to an occupied people, living under the constant threat of the Roman Empire. They had *had* their faces struck by Roman soldiers during interrogations. Poor farmers and peasants had been taken to court and sued for their coats, their inner-garments, to satisfy debts they could never earn enough to pay off. And they were familiar with the law that allowed Roman soldiers to conscript them to walk alongside them and carry their pack for a mile.

And because these experiences were part of the daily lives of Jesus' first listeners, they heard some interesting undertones to Jesus' words that are easy for us to miss.

For example, they knew that in first-century Roman culture, the right hand was used for all interpersonal interactions because the left hand was used for less sanitary, more bathroom-oriented things. And so, if a soldier were to strike you on your right cheek, he would do so with his right hand, meaning a back-handed slap. This how soldiers usually struck occupied peoples, how masters struck slaves. To strike someone with the back of your hand was not only to hurt them, but to insult them, to remind them that they were inferior to you.

And yet...if, after being backhanded on the right cheek, Jesus' disciples were to turn and offer their left cheek...well, turn and look at your neighbor in the pew – Don't hit them! – just look at each other, face each other. Look at their left cheek. And look at your right hand.

You see, I can give someone a dismissive, insulting, backhanded slap on their right cheek. But if they turn their left cheek toward me...the only way I can strike them again is with the front of my hand, my fist. And to hit someone that way, well, that would be to acknowledge them as my equal. To strike them as if they were another soldier, or a fellow citizen with whom I'd gotten into a fist fight, rather than a "worthless" slave, or peasant.

So yes, by turning the other cheek and refusing to retaliate, Jesus' disciples are potentially subjecting themselves to more pain and further injury. But they are also refusing to surrender their humanity, asserting their equality and worth before God, denying the one who strikes them the power to humiliate them. To turn the other cheek is to reclaim your dignity from

the one who seeks to rob you of it by striking you in the first place. It is to stand firmly on your own two feet and say, “I refuse to play by the rules of your violent game. I am human. I am created in the very image of God, I am God’s own holy Temple. And if you strike me again, you, too, are going to have to acknowledge my humanity.”

The same is accomplished in Jesus’ second example: when someone sues you for your coat (your inner garment), give them your cloak (your outer garment) as well. You see, the Law of Moses forbids taking someone’s outer garment, the very last piece of clothing they have left. Giving away your cloak exposes not only your body, but the injustice, the ruthlessness of the person suing you for the very clothes on your back. It says, “Look, you have now taken everything from me – but you can’t take my humanity.

Likewise, if a Roman soldier forces you to carry their pack for one mile and you go with them two, *you* reclaim the moral initiative. You shame your opponent by saying, “You mean to take from me? Well look, I will give to you.”

In all three of these examples, Jesus gives his followers instructions that would ultimately throw their opponents off balance, robbing them of their power to be cruel, without resorting to violence. Jesus is asking his disciples – is asking *us* – to play by different rules. To resist that which is evil not with force and violence, but with love and creativity.

Perhaps this idea sounds naïve and romantic. Noble, sure, but unrealistic. After all, we live in a world where “might makes right”. And to be sure, what Jesus is teaching us here is not easy. Following this Third Way of creative, loving, non-violent resistance means taking some significant personal risks. It can lead to death...even death on a cross. But it’s not impossible. Look at the life and witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, both of whom pointed to *this* teaching of Jesus as a major influence in their lives and in their work. And as we know, the creative, non-violent of love and resistance that these two men practiced ultimately changed the course of history.

But when we start talking about and “heroes” like King and Gandhi, it becomes easy for us “ordinary” people to dismiss their actions as “something *I* could never do.” Which is why I want to close this morning by telling you the story of a group of clowns in Knoxville, Tennessee.

In 2007, the Klu Klux Klan had announced that they would hold a rally in Knoxville, and most of the people in the city were not thrilled with this news. Some folks wanted to show up and protest with their own signs and chants, but knew this wouldn’t be effective because the KKK feeds off of anger and opposition. Others thought it would be best to ignore them, to pretend they weren’t there. But, they realized that this would still allow the Klan’s message of hate and racism to ring loud and clear through the streets of their city.

And so, when the KKK came to town on May 26, a group of citizens dressed as clowns gathered on the other side of the street. When the Klan shouted “White power!”, these clowns, complete with face paint and red noses, put their hands to their ears as if they were trying to make out what this other group of strangely dressed people were saying. One of the clowns jumped up and exclaimed, I’ve got it! “They’re shouting white *flour!*” The other clowns quickly agreed. They pulled out big bags flour that they’d brought with them, and started to throw handfuls at one another, laughing and singing in one giant flour fight.

The Klan members were not amused, and eventually the group of clowns decided they must have heard it wrong. So they listened again to the persistent shouts of “White power!” Another clown threw up her hands and declared, “That’s what it is! They’re shouting white *flowers!*” And so, the clowns pulled out bouquets of white flowers and danced around, handing out flowers to one another and the crowd that had gathered.

Things went on like this for a while longer. After the white flowers, the clowns pulled out a hose and started spraying one another, deciding perhaps the Klansmen were shouting “*Tight showers!*” Later a few clowns donned wedding dresses and started to shout “*Wife Power!*”, which, perhaps not surprisingly, generated much applause from the *women* in the crowd of on-lookers. The KKK eventually gave up and left an hour and a half earlier than planned.

A Third Way of creative, non-violent resistance. The KKK showed up that day with anger and hatred, that’s what they do. But the people of Knoxville chose not to respond in kind. They showed up with the creative weapon of love and used humor and levity and *play* to reclaim their own humanity. To witness to the image of God present in people *of* all races and colors in their community. And even, perhaps, to witness to the image of God in the Klansmen themselves. Because when we respond to evil with the creative, nonviolent weapon of love – when we dance in the street as clowns, or turn the other cheek, or go the second mile – we offer even our *enemies* the opportunity to do things differently as well. To quit playing by the rules of violence and to play – with us – by Jesus’ rule of love.

Conclusion:

Friends, as I look at the world around us right now, I can’t help but think that the days, and weeks, and months ahead are going to provide us with an abundance of opportunities to follow Jesus’ teachings. To engage in this practice of creative, non-violent resistance. To respond to violence and evil with the only weapon Jesus has given us: the creative weapon of love.

So – will we do it? Let’s get to work, folks, and find out.