

A Reflection on Matthew 5.38-48
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Epiphany 7A
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Jesus is teaching within his Jewish tradition as he lays out this Third Way for his listeners. He is reminding them that they are equal, whole participants in the world, called to holiness and goodness in the image of God. In the face of constant insecurity, how could they possibly remember? At any time the government could announce orders that negatively impacted someone's individual life or collectively crushed a community. No one knew when these orders would interrupt the routine of family, work, and relative peace.

The Third Way of Jesus is an invitation for everyone involved (persecutor and persecuted, oppressor and oppressed, powerful and weak) to be lifted out of those roles and elevated to the fullness of humanity breathed by God. This Way existed long before the words of Matthew and is found also in the commands of Leviticus. Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy.

When you are hard at work on your land, harvesting your grain and grapes, the fruit of your physical effort, remember the poor and the stranger in your midst. Leave some of your abundance for them because I am the Lord your God.

Watch your greed, your words, your oaths. Be mindful of what you speak and promise because I am the Lord your God.

In dealing with the people around you, your family, your business associates, those whose destruction may benefit you, those who are made vulnerable by disabilities, you shall love your neighbor as yourself because I am the Lord your God.

The Ways of God are made clear when we follow the trajectory of scripture. Everyone. Every single human person. Every good egg and rotten egg. Every neighbor and stranger. Every one we adore and every one we loathe. Each and all of us are made in the image of God and called to holiness by God's breath. Our actions, our words, and even our thoughts draw us more fully into this holiness or farther away from our true humanity. And while we may acknowledge how beautiful that sounds, I hope we are honest enough to also acknowledge how difficult this invitation is to live out.

That's why when Amy Butler (formerly of St. Charles Avenue and now of the Riverside Church), recently "decided to "preach" the entire Sermon on the Mount — two full chapters with no breaks, the words of Jesus. In coffee hour after worship, several people came up to [her] to tell [her] they really did not like or agree with some of the parts of [her] sermon that day."¹

Today we observe the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany before our Carnival celebrations sweep us toward Lent. These weeks of Epiphany are all about welcoming the light into the darkness—we've been guided by the light of the Christ candles before us as we've walked together through the Sermon on the Mount each week since Christmas.

What do we do with the words of Jesus that challenge us? The ones that seem impossible to live out? What do we do with a call to love our neighbors and our enemies? What do we do with these calls to holiness that permeate even our private thoughts? What do we do with the shame and fear that surely come as we examine our inner-most selves and immediately recognize that we do not measure up to the invitation of this Jesus Way? How do we love when we are so angry? How can we be gracious when we are holding grudges? How do we welcome the stranger and the foreigner and the poor and the vulnerable when we fear them?

We persist in the way of God's love. Be holy because God is holy. Be perfect because God is perfect. Clearly, these words do not mean we snap our fingers and arrive at completion because of our sheer will. This is not a failure challenge in which God calls us to become something we cannot. No, in fact, God is calling us to be fully who we already are while growing and becoming and growing into perfect holiness. This perfection is a way of perseverance...a way of persistence even when the powers that be around you want for you to give up and submit to everything that is broken.

David Lose names the "the ridiculously hard part" of Jesus' words, "'Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.' One key observation here: the word we translate 'perfect' is actually the Greek word *telos* and implies less a moral perfection than it does reaching one's intended outcome. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches. Which means that we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, 'Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be.'"

¹ <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-sermon-on-the-mount-is-counter-cultural-thats-the-point/>
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Together, we persist toward the fullness of who God has retake us all to be. We live as though we believe the words and ways of Jesus are possible and true. To that end, Karoline Lewis writes, "this is not the time to be perfect, but to persist. To persist toward the goal to which the Beatitudes give witness. To persist in bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven for all people in the face of continued resistance. To persist in a vision that others might not be able to see...Not toward the goal of correction, critique, or condemnation, but toward the divine end that realizes the full blessings of what God has in mind for all people."²

Persist, my brothers and sisters. Persist in challenging the broken powers of this world. Persist in loving your neighbor as yourself. Persist in welcoming even when you're not sure how. Persist in shedding everything the world lays on you that takes you farther from who you are at the core of your being. Persist in love. Persist in the goodness of God.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4818>

REFLECTIONS: JESUS' THIRD WAY by Walter Wink

1st Reading: Matthew 5.38-42

Reflection:

As we move through the scripture before us today, the work of Walter Wink will guide us. These reflections on the teachings of Christ are found in *The Powers that Be* and highlight "Jesus' Third Way." Wink begins:

Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. "Turn the other cheek" has come to imply a passive, doormat-like quality that has made the Christian way seem cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. "Resist not evil" seems to break the back of all opposition to evil and to counsel submission. "Going the second mile" has become a platitude meaning nothing more than "extend yourself" and appears to encourage collaboration with the oppressor. Jesus' teaching, viewed this way, is impractical, masochistic, and even suicidal—an invitation to bullies and spouse-batterers to wipe up the floor with their supine Christian victims. Jesus never displayed that kind of passivity. Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, such distortions are clearly neither in Jesus nor his teaching, which, in context, is one of the most revolutionary political statements ever uttered:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Jesus is not telling us to submit to evil, but to refuse to oppose it on its own terms. We are not to let the opponent dictate the methods of our opposition. He is urging us to transcend both passivity and violence by finding a third way, one that is at once assertive and yet nonviolent. The correct translation would be the one still preserved in the earliest renditions of this saying found in the New Testament epistles: "Do not repay evil for evil." The Scholars Version of Matt. 5:39a is superb: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil."

The examples that follow confirm this reading. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:39b). You are probably imagining a blow with the right fist. But such a blow would fall on the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require the left hand. But the left hand could be used only for unclean tasks; at Qumran, a Jewish religious community of Jesus' day, to gesture with the left hand

meant exclusion from the meeting and penance for ten days. To grasp this you must physically try it: how would you hit the other's right cheek with your right hand? If you have tried it, you will know: the only feasible blow is a backhand.

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; Romans, Jews. The whole point of the blow was to force someone who was out of line back into place. Notice Jesus' audience: "If anyone strikes you." These are people used to being thus degraded. He is saying to them, "Re-fuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek." (Now you really need to physically enact this to see the problem.) By turning the cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again: his nose is in the way. And anyway, it's like telling a joke twice; if it didn't work the first time, it simply won't work. The left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist; but only equals fought with fists, as we know from Jewish sources, and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. He can have the slave beaten, but he can no longer cow him. By turning the cheek, then, the "inferior" is saying: "I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won't take it anymore."

Such defiance is no way to avoid trouble. Meek acquiescence is what the master wants. Such "cheeky" behavior may call down a flogging, or worse. But the point has been made. The Powers That Be have lost their power to make people submit. And when large numbers begin behaving thus (and Jesus was addressing a crowd), you have a social revolution on your hands.

In that world of honor and shaming, the "superior" has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

How different this is from the usual view that this passage teaches us to turn the other cheek so our batterer can simply clobber us again! How often that interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children. And it was never what Jesus intended in the least. To such victims he advises, "Stand up for yourselves, defy your masters, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new, third way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal."

2nd Reading: Matthew 5.43-48

Reflection:

Jesus' second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law. A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan. Only the poorest of the poor were subjected to such treatment. Deuteronomy 24:10-13 provided that a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer robe, but it had to be returned each evening so the poor man would have something in which to sleep.

Jesus is not advising people to add to their disadvantage by renouncing justice altogether, as so many commentators have suggested. He is telling impoverished debtors, who have nothing left but the clothes on their backs, to use the system against itself.

Why, then, does Jesus counsel them to give over their undergarments as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27). By stripping, the debtor has brought shame on the creditor.

Imagine the guffaws this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, covered with shame, the poor debtor's outer garment in the one hand, his undergarment in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor. The debtor had no hope of winning the case; the law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above shame. At the same time, he has registered a stunning protest against the system that created his debt. He has said in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?"

Imagine the debtor leaving court naked. His friends and neighbors, aghast, inquire what happened. He explains. They join his growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. This is guerrilla theater! The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply punitive, since it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent.

Jesus' teaching on nonviolence provides a hint of how to take on the entire system by unmasking its essential cruelty and burlesquing its pretensions to justice. Those who

listen will no longer be treated as sponges to be squeezed dry by the rich. They can accept the laws as they stand, push them to absurdity, and reveal them for what they have become. They can strip naked, walk out before their fellows, and leave the creditors, and the whole economic edifice they represent, stark naked.

Going the second mile, Jesus' third example, is drawn from the relatively enlightened practice of limiting to a single mile the amount of forced or impressed labor that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Such compulsory service was a constant feature in Palestine from Persian to late Roman times. Whoever was found on the street could be coerced into service, as was Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21). Armies had to be moved with dispatch. Ranking legionnaires bought slaves or donkeys to carry their packs of sixty to eighty-five pounds (not including weapons). The majority of the rank and file, however, had to depend on impressed civilians. Whole villages sometimes fled to avoid being forced to carry soldiers' baggage.

What we have overlooked in this passage is the fact that carrying the pack a second mile is an infraction of military code. With few exceptions, minor infractions were left to the disciplinary control of the centurion (commander of one hundred men). He might fine the offending soldier, flog him, put him on a ration of barley instead of wheat, make him camp outside the fortifications, force him to stand all day before the general's tent holding a clod of dirt in his hands—or, if the offender was a buddy, issue a mild reprimand. But the point is that the soldier does not know what will happen.

It is in this context of Roman military occupation that Jesus speaks. He does not counsel revolt. One does not "befriend" the soldier, draw him aside and drive a knife into his ribs. Jesus was surely aware of the futility of armed insurrection against Roman imperial might; he certainly did nothing to encourage those whose hatred of Rome would soon explode into violence.

But why carry the soldier's pack a second mile? Does this not go to the opposite extreme by aiding and abetting the enemy? Not at all. The question here, as in the two previous instances, is how the oppressed can recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed.

The rules are Caesar's, but how one responds to the rules is God's, and Caesar has no power over that.

3rd Reading: Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18

Reflection:

Jesus did not endorse armed revolution. It is not hard to see why. In the conditions of first-century Palestine, violent revolution against the Romans would prove catastrophic. But he did lay the foundations for a social revolution, as biblical scholar Richard A. Horsley has pointed out. And a social revolution becomes political when it reaches a critical threshold of acceptance; this in fact did happen to the Roman empire as the Christian church overcame it from below.

Jesus is not advocating nonviolence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy, but as a just means of opposing the enemy in a way that holds open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just also. Both sides must win. We are summoned to pray for our enemies' transformation, and to respond to ill treatment with a love that is not only godly but also from God.

The logic of Jesus' examples in Matthew 5:39b-41 goes beyond both inaction and overreaction to a new response, fired in the crucible of love, that promises to liberate the oppressed from evil even as it frees the oppressor from sin. Do not react violently to evil, do not counter evil in kind, do not let evil dictate the terms of your opposition, do not let violence lead you to mirror your opponent—this forms the revolutionary principle that Jesus articulates as the basis for nonviolently engaging the Powers.

Jesus, in short, abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, the oppressor resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed.

Some readers may object to the idea of discomforting the soldier or embarrassing the creditor. But can people who are engaged in oppressive acts repent unless made uncomfortable with their actions? There is, admittedly, the danger of using nonviolence as a tactic of revenge and humiliation. There is also, at the opposite extreme, an equal danger of sentimentality and softness that confuses the uncompromising love of Jesus with being nice. Loving confrontation can free both the oppressed from docility and the oppressor from sin. With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored.