

WPC
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Love Your Enemies?!
Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 5:38-48

Some passages in the Bible seem too difficult to preach. Today's Gospel reading is definitely one of those texts. I mean, here we are, at the pinnacle of the Sermon on the Mount, listening as Jesus commands his disciples to do some of the most difficult things imaginable: turn the other cheek, don't retaliate, love your enemies, pray for those who attack you. I realize this is what Jesus himself did, and I know it's what we're supposed to do. I also know that it's really, really hard for most of us to imagine living our lives in this way. And then there's that last verse, the kicker: "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."

These are challenging words, and they're supposed to be. Again, Jesus is talking about a new righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. But how are we to actually live out Jesus' words? I believe we're treading on some dangerous ground here, because this text has often been used all too irresponsibly over the years – but I also believe this text may have a very different meaning than what many of us have been taught.

Jesus says, “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.”

This passage has generally been understood by people as teaching non-resistance, to simply let evil ones run all over you and give up all concern for your own justice. If they hit you on one cheek, turn the other and let them strike you there too. How many wives have been battered, how many children cower in fear of a cruel parent, only to think the Bible has told them not to resist, not to protect themselves? Worse yet, how many preachers over the years have taken these dangerous words and gone precisely that route – explicitly telling their congregations that such treatment at the hands of another, if not justified, is at least to be tolerated.

But here is a place where careful cross-cultural translation is so critical. Certainly at first glance Jesus’ words “sound like ludicrous counsel to those living in a violent world. It sounds as if Jesus is not just standing on a mountain, but is living with his head in the clouds, as if he’s saying, ‘Just lie down and let the world run over you.’” But my preaching professor Tom

Long urges us to take a closer look at his words, because Jesus always resisted evil.

The word translated “resist” in our Bible is the Greek word *antistenai*. *Anti* is familiar to us in English – it means “against.” For instance, the “Anti”-Defamation League is an organization against defamation. *Stenai* means to stand. So, the word literally means “stand against.” *Stenai* is a technical term for warfare. The word literally means “stand against” or “taking a stand” - it refers to the marching of two armies up against each other until they actually collide with one another and the battle ensues.

So when Jesus says, “Do not resist an evildoer,” there’s something stronger than simply resist. He’s not saying to never resist evil; he’s saying to not resist *violently*, to not resist evil on its own terms. In other words, don't let your opponent dictate the terms of your opposition. Jesus is trying to break the spiral of violence. By not resisting violently, we don’t return evil for evil.

Jesus gives three examples of what he means by not returning evil for evil. The first of these is, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” According to theologian Walter Wink, this is classic non-violent resistance. Imagine if I were to strike a blow with my right fist at

your face, which cheek would it land on? It would be the left. It's the wrong cheek in terms of the text we are looking at. Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek..." I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a left hook, but in Semitic society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

According to Wink¹, the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It's a symbolic blow intended to insult, humiliate, degrade, to put you back where you belong. 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. So he tells them to turn the other cheek.

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to your enemy, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God." What Jesus is saying is in effect, "Refuse to accept

¹ "The Third Way," Dr. Walter Wink, 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1993.

this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek.”
If they’re going to hit you, don’t also let them humiliate you. Change the terms. Change your stance. Thrust forward your other cheek; in other words, position yourself so they must take you on as an equal. Resisting in this way is dangerous, but it would be clear to your enemy that your dignity is intact.

The second instance Jesus gives is, "If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your coat, give your cloak as well." I’m not sure why our translation says “coat,” because the correct word is “shirt.” It should say, “If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your shirt, give your coat as well.” So a powerful enemy is suing you and wants the shirt off your back. You can’t win, because the law is on the side of the wealthy. But Jesus says you can show your enemy what he or she is really doing. “Give him your cloak as well; and, in a world where most people only wore those two garments, shame him with your impoverished nakedness. This is what the rich, powerful and careless are doing. They are reducing the poor to a state of shame.”²

What Jesus is showing us in these two examples so far is that you don't have to wait before God’s kingdom fully comes before you can start

² N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 52.

living humanly. You can begin living humanly now under present conditions. The kingdom of God is breaking into our lives now.

Jesus' third example is "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." This example is referring to an enemy soldier forcing you to carry his pack for him. Wink notes that these packs weighed 65 to 85 pounds, not counting weapons. These soldiers had to move quickly to get to the borders where trouble had broken out. The military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force the civilian to carry the pack, but only one mile. There were mile markers on every Roman road. If - and this is the part that's left out of our text - the civilian was forced to carry the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in infraction of military code, and military code was always more strictly enforced than civilian. So Jesus is saying, "All right. The next time the soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Carry it and then when you come to the mile marker, keep going."

The soldier suddenly finds himself in a position he has never been in before. He has always known before exactly what you would do - you would mutter and you would complain, but you would carry it until the mile marker came, when you would drop it. Suddenly, this person is carrying the pack on. The soldier doesn't know why, but he also knows that he's in

infraction of military law and if his centurion finds out about this, he's in deep trouble. Jesus is teaching these people how to take the initiative away from their oppressors, to resist in a clever and non-violent way.

In the past, we thought we had only two choices, either resist evil or don't resist evil. At first glance, Jesus seemed to be saying, "Don't resist evil," and, therefore, the only alternative seemed for Christians to be doormats, to give up all concern for our own justice as well as the justice of others. Now we can better understand that Jesus is not calling on people to be non-resistant. He's calling on them to resist, only non-violently. He's calling on them to resist in a way that doesn't harm other people. Fred Craddock writes, "The teaching does not call simply for nonretaliation or passivity, but rather for positive acts of good. One may be victimized, but one is not to think and act like a victim. Jesus was not a victim; he gave his life."³

In addition to the obvious implications for abusive relationships – you can be a bully, but I still have value and worth; I am made in God's image, and I can leave!- think nonviolent resistance under Gandhi's leadership in India, or during the Civil Rights movement in our own country, or even the recent revolution in Egypt. The point is not simply non-violence, but non-

³ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A*, p. 64.

violent *resistance*. “It’s about changing the game by delegitimizing oppressive power by claiming a higher power.”⁴

Finally, what does Jesus mean when he says, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect?” Here, it’s helpful to look at the tense of the Greek sentence. Most often, the English translation comes across as a hortatory imperative, urging or exhorting us to some action: “You must be perfect.” But in the Greek, the future indicative is used, which is best translated into English as a prediction or a promise. So instead of translating the text, “you must be perfect,” the better translation is “you will be/you are going to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jesus is predicting and promising that we will be perfect in the future.

The word translated “perfect” is the word *telios*, which means “end,” “purpose,” “complete,” “whole,” “fulfilled.” It doesn’t mean not ever making mistakes or getting anything wrong. Long notes, “Perfection is not making an A+ on every test; perfection is wholeness, consumed by love, holiness. To be ‘perfect’ is to respond to other people – even our enemies – with the kind of compassion and desire for the good that expresses the way God responds to the world.”⁵ To be perfect in this sense is to love in the

⁴ Anthony Robinson, Weekly Reading, Feb. 14, 2011.

⁵ Tom Long, Matthew, p. 64.

manner of God. We're not there yet, but Jesus tells us there will be a time in the future when we will be at that place.

There's a story of a father who had to go away from his young family for three or four days on business. Anxious that his wife should be properly looked after in his absence, he had a word with his oldest son, who was nine at the time.

"When I'm away," he said, "I want you to think what I would normally do around the house, and you do it for me." He had in mind, of course, cleaning up in the kitchen, washing the dishes, putting out the garbage, and similar tasks.

On his return, he asked his wife what the son had done. "Well," she said, "it was very strange. Straight after breakfast he made himself another cup of coffee, went into the living room, put on some loud music, and read the newspaper for half an hour." The father was left wondering whether his son had obeyed him a bit too accurately.

The shocking thing about this passage in the Sermon on the Mount is that we're told to watch what our heavenly Father is doing and then do the same ourselves. Only instead of imitating a human father's faults, we're to imitate our heavenly Father's perfection in the way he expresses compassion and love to everyone, even his enemies.

Impossible? Sure, at one level. But, as N.T. Wright states, “Jesus’ teaching isn’t just good advice, it’s **good news**. Jesus did it all himself, and opened up the new way of being human so that all who follow him can discover it...The Sermon on the Mount isn’t just about us. If it was, we might admire it as a fine bit of idealism, but we’d then return to our normal lives. It’s about Jesus himself. This was the blueprint for his own life. He asks nothing of his followers that he hasn’t faced himself.”⁶

Thanks be to God that as we’re on the road to wholeness and fulfillment, Jesus walks alongside of us every step of the way. Amen.

⁶ Wright, p. 52-53.