

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

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*Matthew 5:38-48*

*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. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

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"When they go low, we go high."

These words were prophetically spoken by Michelle Obama during last year's election at a time that the country was getting exhausted with the incessant insult-based political conversation. At the time, we thought that perhaps this was simply the usual muck-racking that goes on during a typical presidential election. Surely, we thought, this would end once the election had come to its end. Boy, were we wrong.

Unfortunately, it is *so* much easier to be rude than polite. When someone insults me, it is quite natural for me to lash back out at them immediately. To do so requires no real restraint or wisdom. On the other hand, when someone insults me, it takes tremendous courage and self-discipline for me to restrain myself, count to 10, and take the high road. Sometimes I do that pretty well. Other times, well let's just say, even pastors can lose their cool at times. We, too, are human.

Jesus, I think, new that paying back anger for anger and hate for hate was an all-too human tendency, because he spends a lot of time talking about conflict management in the Gospels. Today is the fourth Sunday in a row that you and I have been walking through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel. Last week, Jesus spoke to us about reconciling with one another in order to live more faithfully together as a religious community. Today, Jesus goes specifically to the heart of the matter and talks about the physical act of violence, that of striking another person.

"But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."

Oh, boy, that's a tough one. At a time when our body's natural "fight or flight" instinct takes hold, Jesus is calling us to stop, think, and turn the other cheek. If there was *ever* a more countercultural notion of Jesus Christ, it's this one! Whether that slap comes in the form of a physical slap, or a more emotional slap, such as an insult or deliberately spread rumor or falsehood, Jesus tells us not to return hatred with hatred but to return it with love. Ben Witherington, in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, uses some

brilliant wordplay to describe this instruction when he says the following: “Jesus urges...that the evildoer not be responded to in kind; indeed his is to be responded to in kindness...”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus calls us to return hate with kindness. To return insult with politeness. To return invective with calm, but firm, composure. Call me cynical, but I do not know of one person who would say that such restraint comes easily.

And as if it weren't already hard enough to consider turning the other cheek, Jesus provides four more scenarios in which we might demonstrate this “high road” of community engagement. “If someone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them also your cloak,” Jesus says. “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile,” he continues. “Finally,” he finishes, “give to every beggar and loan money to anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

At this point in the Sermon on the Mount, I could easily envision some people frustratingly walking away at this point in Jesus' press conference. “How on *earth* can he expect that of anyone?” “Yeah right!” “Count me out; I know right now I'll fail miserably at *this* game!”

And, thus, we have the interpretive task that has flummoxed people for millennia. Why would Jesus place in front of us such an unreasonable expectation? Some have explained this passage away by saying that Jesus actually knows that all these instructions are really impossible but he thinks it's important that we strive to achieve them anyways. Others have said that Jesus was only speaking to a specific audience and that Jesus would not have applied these instructions to everyone across the board. Both of these interpretations are, perhaps, clever and convenient ways to get us off the hook. And, if I'm to be completely honest, I've employed both of these interpretations over the course of my lifetime. And I suspect that I'm not the only one to do so.

The uncomfortable and bewildering point of today's passage is this: Jesus calls us all to radical acts of kindness and love. We are to turn the other cheek. No matter how hard it is to do so.

Now, before we go on, I have to make two pastoral notes here. Now, we discuss and debate what it means to “turn the other cheek” all day long but I would hope that we would understand clearly at least two things that such a phrase *does not* mean.

First of all, Jesus' instruction for us to “turn the other cheek” does *not* mean that Jesus desires us to be passive pushovers. To tell the woman being beaten up by her husband that Jesus calls her to “turn the other cheek” is a despicable way to use this passage. I refuse to believe that Jesus calls us to allow oppressors to walk all over us. When one person is being oppressed by another, the Biblical narrative makes it inarguably clear that God is on the side of the oppressed. To tell the undocumented immigrant who sought refuge in a domestic violence shelter who has, nevertheless, been deported back to Mexico by ICE agents that she should just passively accept her situation is NOT what Jesus would want her, or us, to do. I believe that Jesus' call for us to “turn the other cheek” is, rather, meant to be a constant check on our instinctual tendency to seek revenge. But we would, therefore, do well to be reminded that “an eye for an eye” leaves the whole world blind.

The second thing that I hope we would all agree on is that to “turn the other cheek” does *not* mean that we are never allowed to be passionate, emotional, and - yes - even *disruptive*, in our protests against injustice. Oppressed people have heard *far* too often that they should “just get over it” and “accept it” and

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<sup>1</sup>Witherington, Ben. Matthew. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2006, page 136.

“stop making a scene.” To “turn the other cheek” is not a commandment to be passive in the wake of real injustices. When cruelties happen, when others’ humanity is denied, when people are crying out for justice and equal treatment, “turning the other cheek” does not mean that we are called to “look the other way.” Let us not forget that Jesus was not afraid of making a scene and - yes - even getting angry over a cause that he held dear. I seem to remember a certain story about Jesus entering the temple and becoming so enraged that the money-changers had turned his Father’s house into a “den of thieves” that he ran around wildly turning over tables and chasing people out of the courtyard. So, remember, when someone says “What Would Jesus Do,” even *that* is within the realm of possibilities.

Now, that being said, that should not be used as an excuse to justify every angry act even if it is done with the “best of intentions.” There is something to be said about the fact that of all the many, many, many actions of Jesus we have before us in the biblical narrative, only *one* is physically violent.

At the end of the day, I believe that today’s passage reminds us that we are responsible to each other for actions that defy the common logic of the world. Right now, in the news everyday, we hear about a president that chooses to lash out on Twitter to his 25,200,000 followers whenever he is challenged or criticized in any way. Jesus calls us to model a somewhat different kind of approach to conflict management.

Jesus tells us to take the high road not just for theological reasons but for practical reasons. When “the other cheek is turned” people notice. People noticed when Ghandi protested nonviolently. People noticed when the civil rights protestors were tossed hither and thither by fire hoses. People noticed when Justin Trudeau tweeted out a picture of him welcoming refugees to Canada. And Ghandi, the civil rights protestors, and Justin Trudeau and born more than their fair share of insults because of their kind, but firm, actions of love.

Jesus, too, knew what it was like to have insults hurled at him. Jesus knew what it was like to be despised and rejected and humiliated. And, yet, there are few words more remembered in the biblical narrative than, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” At a time when Jesus could have, literally, called down fire from heaven to seek revenge on his enemies, he chose to model a kind of behavior that builds a bigger table instead of a bigger wall. At the end of the day, when it came down between him and the people who crucified him, Jesus had the last laugh. And that laugh was not a cruel, vindictive laugh, but a laugh of joy that love had finally defeated hate.

*That* is the narrative that you and I are called to embody by today’s passage. That is the narrative that is needed so desperately in this world right now more than ever. That is the narrative that takes work to preach. That is the narrative that takes a community of broken people like you and me to hold one another accountable to follow each and every day.

I do not stand here before you as someone who has mastered the art of compassion and kindness. I am far from the goal to which Jesus calls me to. However, I, like you, am part of a community whose Savior holds us to task when it comes to kindness, compassion, and levelheadedness.

And so, I leave you (yet again) with the very wise words of Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: “Dark times lie ahead of us and there will be a time when we must choose between what is easy and what is right.”

When someone strikes you, choose reconciliation instead of revenge.

When someone seeks refuge, choose welcome and not coldheartedness.

When someone insults you, pray for them and don't return fire with fire.

When someone goes low, go high.

It ain't easy. Lord knows that. But we follow a Savior who has talked the talk and walked the walk. So let's listen to him and try to follow his example by filling the empty places of hurt in this world with acts of love that build one another up.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.