

Is Turning the Other Cheek Giving In?

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

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"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; (Matt. 5:38-9)

While I had an absolutely wonderful time in Tennessee, it is awfully nice to be back and to see all of you this morning. I spent several days with my sister in Memphis and then flew to Nashville to visit Jax in an 8-passenger plane that lurched with every puff of wind at 8,000 feet. I confess to being most uncomfortable for the first 10 minutes.

One of the nicest things about the trip was being able to share a cup of coffee discussing the morning news. There was a twist to the old routine however. Instead of vying for one section or another and rustling through the pages we were connected to the household Wi-Fi looking at digital screens flicking or tapping our way to the next article. Most days there was a video or two often from one of the late-night shows riffing or spoofing events from the prior day. Much of the news was about resistance and protests against Executive Orders and cabinet nominees from many parts of the country. There was very little sense of coming together around a common vision of our nation. If anything the lines seemed to be more sharply drawn.

So we look to this morning's Gospel reading to help us better understand how, as Christians, we should respond to events in the world. What might Jesus have to say about the obvious changes taking place around the globe? This morning we finally finish Matthew's 5th chapter; we have been reflecting on this single chapter for an entire month. Can anyone remember that far back – to how the chapter begins? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus and his disciples are still sitting on the rise of that hill looking out over the Sea of Galilee. It's been a long session. May I ask your hardworking elected officers to reflect on that for just a moment because we anticipate a somewhat lengthy training session this afternoon with the head of our Presbytery?!

Jesus begins saying "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth.'" Jesus was referring to an ancient law dating back to before Moses, to Hammurabi and the Assyrians. It was understood that this was an important first step toward mercy and equitable justice. It was meant to convey a sense of proportionality; the punishment should be proportionate to the offense. It remains relevant more than 3,000 years later. We know that even today, in some cultures, honor killings are still being carried out. Often this involves a woman whose behavior has been deemed "inappropriate" thus bringing shame on her family. A brother or even a father would then assassinate the daughter as a means of restoring the family's honor. Hardly an eye for an eye!

In 20 quick years, a century's worth of progress had been undone and the very documents on which this nation had been founded were stained with blood and hypocrisy.

Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish but to fulfill the law." But this morning's reading underscores the notion that Jesus intended to further elevate the law. It was no longer a matter of carrying around your little checklist of 613 laws and saying I have done these things what a good boy am I. Jesus says that is no longer good enough; he has elevated the law telling us we must go beyond the letter of the law; we must be faithful to the spirit of the law. He goes so far to say we must be perfect like our Father in heaven. We accept this teaching understanding its impossibility but rejecting any notion of futility. We understand at some deep level that Jesus is setting parameters to make us the best that we can be; that by going beyond the letter of the law we are becoming more Christ-like and more pleasing in God's eyes.

Torah says help the hungry by not gathering the gleanings or harvesting to the edge of the field. It says do not steal or lie or cheat those who do work for you. Leviticus tells us we must not slander, hate, bear a grudge or take vengeance. It exhorts us to be just in our judgment, to not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. In sum, the Lord says you shall love your neighbor as yourself. That was radical stuff when Moses delivered it 3,000 years ago. It went well beyond an eye for an eye.

One morning while in Memphis an article with a provocative title caught my eye and I knew that I would want to read more than once so I emailed it to myself. The article was titled: What Jesus Can Teach Today's Muslims written by Mustafa Akyol, a scholar, author and op-ed contributor to the New York Times. Akyol looks at the long arc of history going back to first century Palestine. He references Arnold Toynbee one of the most influential historians of the last century. He reminds us that although Jesus claimed to be the Messiah he was not the Messiah the oppressed Jews of Jerusalem were looking for. As Akyol states, "he did not unleash an armed rebellion against Rome. He did not bow down to Rome, either. He put his attention to something else: reviving the faith and reforming the religion of his people. In particular, he called on his fellow Jews to focus on the religion's moral principles, rather than obsessing with the minute details of religious law. He criticized the legalist Pharisees, for example, for "tithing mint and rue and every herb," but neglecting "justice and the love of God."

Now he says Muslims are experiencing a crisis similar to the one the Jews were experiencing in first century Palestine. They are being pressed by a foreign civilization, and they are troubled by their own fanatics who see the light only in imposing rigid law, sharia, and fighting for theocratic rule. And, I might add, aren't there a few Christians in this country who only see the light through a rigid adherence to their understanding of biblical law and see the Constitution strictly through a Christian lens.

In these unsettled times, what are we called to do? February is Black History Month a fact that I was very

conscious of when I went to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis with my sister. It is built around the motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated nearly 50 years ago having given his "Mountaintop" speech the night before. The museum is extremely well done. It is moving, comprehensive, well-balanced, informative, visually striking and ultimately very disturbing. What was most disturbing to me was this nation's repeating cycle of good intention being willfully upended by evil hearts.

The cycle begins at the creation with the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence undone by the great compromise insisted upon by the southern states in order that that "more perfect union" might be formed. Less than a century later the Civil War would claim 620,000 lives, nearly equal to the number of lives lost in every other war this country has fought. Following the Emancipation Proclamation and Union victory, Congress passed and the nation quickly ratified three amendments to the Constitution that 1) abolished slavery, 2) granted citizenship to all born in the United States including the formerly enslaved, and 3) made it illegal to deny voting rights. It should be noted those voting rights did not extend to women; that would take another 50 years.

In 1875 Congress passed the Civil Rights Act that guaranteed all people regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude the same treatment in public accommodations like railcars, restaurants, and hotels. In the first decade after the Civil War some 120 African-Americans were elected to positions in the Congress. But it didn't last long. With changes in composition of the Supreme Court, just eight years later they ruled the Civil Rights Act to be unconstitutional. And then under the banner of states' rights Mississippi adopted a new constitution to deny blacks the right to vote. Other southern states quickly followed adding poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and other mechanisms to disenfranchise blacks and poor whites. In 1896 in Plessy v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of separate accommodations for blacks and whites. In just 20 years all the blood that was shed in the Civil War seemed for naught. In 20 quick years, a century's worth of progress had been undone and the very

documents on which this nation had been founded were stained with blood and hypocrisy.

So when Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek and to pray for those who persecute us how are we to react? When we see the potential erosion of basic rights around clean air and water, access to healthcare and freedom of choice, quality public schools and a fair-minded judiciary that doesn't confuse corporations with individuals or immigrants with enemies, how are we to respond? Does turning the other cheek mean accepting the contentious advice of a vocal minority that says those who are troubled should simply "get over it"?

I don't think so. Not if we believe in the spirit of the law. Not if we believe in helping the needy by not gathering the gleanings. Not if we understand justice to mean we shall not slander our neighbor, or lie or cheat those who labor on our behalf. Not if we hear those words of the Lord recorded in Leviticus, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

There is a bronze bust of Mohandas Gandhi in the lobby of the Civil Rights Museum. Though not a Christian, Gandhi was greatly influenced by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Gandhi earned history's respect for winning the independence of India by turning the other cheek. Dr. King was also strongly influenced by Jesus Christ and given the example of Gandhi's success made it the core of his effort to regain the civil rights that had been earned and lost a century earlier. King was defined in part by Malcolm X who is quoted as saying, "If you turn the other cheek, you can be enslaved for 1,000 years." King begged to differ and it was largely King's vision that defined the movement against the long odds of Selma, James Meredith, the Freedom Riders, the lunch counter sit-ins that began in Nashville, the bombing of churches and homes that dared to promote voting rights or organize marches. King was jailed 60 times for turning the other cheek and he did not get to the promised land with Abernathy, Jackson, Young or Evers. But by turning the other cheek he

surely won the race he set out to run; he forever changed the course of racial justice in the country.

In 1968 President Johnson pushed through Congress bold legislation with enforcement provisions protecting the right to vote and making housing discrimination illegal. It is known as the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The bitter irony is that these laws reinstated the law enacted 93 years earlier. Since 1968 we have watched many of those laws weakened yet again under the banner of state's rights. We are left to ask how future changes to the court might affect those laws and who will be charged with upholding them?

Before we close let me mention another prominent world figure who learned to turn the other cheek after 27 years in jail for high treason. I speak of Nelson Mandela who defeated apartheid and won independence for South Africa championing Truth and Reconciliation. Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite." Going beyond the letter of the law Mandela speaks directly to the great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Loving those who love you doesn't cut it with Jesus. But praying for those who persecute you and loving your neighbor does not mean having to agree. One of the most challenging characteristics of Christianity is that we are encouraged to think for ourselves in understanding God's will for us. That means we will often differ. But having different views does not give us permission to be dismissive, disrespectful or insulting. Disagreement should not encourage division but rather a renewed commitment to find common ground working together to build the kingdom. That ultimately is what Jesus calls us to do.

Amen