From the Pulpit

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“Jesus’ Way: The Way of Nonviolent Resistance”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; I Corinthians 3:10-11; 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 7, February 23, 2014, dedicated to Sebastian Maxwell Kulwicki on his baptismal day, to all who nonviolently resist evil and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

In this morning’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount (remember the WHOLE Sermon on the Mount Extends from Mt. 5-7), we hear Jesus’ teachings about loving one’s enemies and turning the other cheek. Most Christians tend to ignore these words of Jesus, dismissing them as too impractical and idealistic to be taken seriously. Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi once reflected that “the only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians.” It’s true! We tend to think of turning the other cheek as a weak response to violence. It sounds too passive, as if we who follow Jesus are supposed to live as human doormats, allowing others to walk all over us.

While it is challenging to be nonviolent in the face of injustice, I want to present to you that Jesus’ teachings about loving one’s enemies and turning the other cheek have nothing to do with being passive in the face of injustice or acquiescing to evil. Instead, they have everything to do with standing up to evil and injustice. In the words of Biblical Scholar, Walter Wink, they offer a “third way” — to respond to conflict other than fighting back violently or running away.

Hold on a minute. Doesn’t this passage open with Jesus saying “Do not resist an evildoer”? What about that, Rev. Ahrens? According to Walter Wink, that translation from the original Greek is misleading. The Greek word translated ‘resist’ is antistenai, which literally means to “stand against.” In warfare of Jesus’ time, whole armies would run at each other and crash into each other on the field of battle. They would fight toe-to-toe until one army fell or retreated. The word for this was “Antistenai” or “Taking the Stand” or “Force Down the Enemy.” Antistenai refers not simply to resistance but to violent resistance. So, here Jesus is speaking against violent
resistance to evil. We should oppose evil, but not on its own terms. A far better translation of this verse is the Scholars’ Version: “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil.”

As a side note – when the Geneva Bible came to England from Switzerland, this translation was present. But, King James thought this and other translations would encourage his people to resist his power. To make sure young Reformers didn’t use God’s word to resist him, he wrote his own version of the Bible – taking out and pacifying language – like this – which would empower and encourage people to resist the King. Beware KJV Lovers – the King’s English may sound beautiful – but, it has political and power underpinnings that seek to subvert Jesus’ words and God’s intentions for our work of love and justice. Sadly, most translators meekly follow the KJV to this day.

Jesus digs deeper – making it appear easy to follow him, “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.” In each of these scenarios, Jesus is offering an alternative to the usual responses to conflict of “Forcing Down the Enemy” or fleeing for your life – either hitting back or running away.

Now we have “Stand Your Ground” laws – as in Florida and other places – including Ohio (unless we stand OUR ground against these laws). Unlike the nonviolent resistance laws of Jesus, these laws make it legal to shoot your weapon at another human being if you feel threatened. Translation in the courts, if you are white and your neighbor is an African-American young man wearing a hoody or playing music too loud – shoot. You can kill your neighbor and get away with it. You can make your case for homicide and walk away a free man. How far we have come from the Biblical intent of Jesus – and the loving intent of God!

When Jesus stands HIS ground - he is using a “third Way.” I will call it – The Jesus Way. Walter Wink outlines it. It involves standing one’s ground, seizing the moral initiative, and finding a creative alternative to violence. It means recognizing one’s own power, asserting one’s own humanity and dignity as a person, refusing to submit to or to accept the inferior position, breaking the cycle of humiliation. It means being willing to suffer rather than retaliate and to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws, thereby exposing the injustice of the system and depriving the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective.

Someone striking you on the right cheek, Wink points out, would have used his right hand to do so, since the left hand was used in Jesus’ day only for unclean
tasks. So, Jesus is referring to someone slapping you with the back of his hand, which was a way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves. Romans did the same to Jews. It was a way of putting someone of inferior status in his or her place. Under such circumstances, for an inferior to retaliate against a superior would have been suicidal, Wink says. But by turning the other cheek, they could rob their oppressors of the power to humiliate them. By turning the other cheek they would be saying, in effect, “Try again. Hitting me with the back of your hand did not achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status (gender, race, age, wealth) does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me.”

This puts the superior in a difficult position. What does he do? Does he hit the other cheek? If so, how? You can’t backhand it with your right hand. And if you use your right fist, you make yourself an equal, acknowledging the other as a peer. But the whole point of the backhanded slap was to reinforce the inequality between you. By turning the other cheek, the person of inferior status has refused to submit, seized the moral initiative, asserted his or her human dignity, and thrown the superior off-balance. That is Jesus’ third way of nonviolent engagement.

In Jesus’ second example, a debtor falling ever deeper into poverty is unable to pay his debt and so his creditor takes him to court to exact payment by legal means. All the debtor has left are his woolen outer garment, which would serve as his blanket at night, and his linen undergarment or tunic shirt. Once the creditor takes his coat, all the poor man has left is the shirt on his back. By giving the creditor his shirt as well, the debtor stands before everyone stark naked, as if to say, “Here, take everything! Now you have everything except my body. Will you take that next?” There was less shame in being naked than in viewing or causing the nakedness. So by stripping naked, the debtor turns the tables on the creditor, shaming him, and also protesting against the whole economic system that caused the poor man’s indebtedness in the first place.

A third example of Jesus’ third way is “going the second mile.” Here Jesus is referring to the right of a Roman soldier to force a civilian to carry his pack for one mile, but no further – no matter what size, age, or gender of the civilian. By carrying the soldier’s pack a second mile a civilian would again be seizing the moral initiative, asserting his human dignity, and throwing the soldier off-balance. Not only that, Wink points out that if you carried the soldier’s pack a second mile, it got him in trouble. First Century historian, Josephus points out that this lesson in nonviolent resistance changed the way Roman soldiers forced their packs upon the people.

Some people are willing to concede that Jesus’ nonviolent ethic might work at the individual level – person-to-person – but they argue that it would not work in
social conflicts between groups of people, and certainly not on a national or international scale. But this argument doesn’t hold water given the long history of nonviolent social movements. Think of the movement to abolish slavery, the social gospel movement to change the internal structures serving the urban poor, the women’s suffrage movement, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement. The history of nonviolent struggle is long, but it’s largely forgotten. Remember the Indian Independence Movement led by Gandhi against the British. Remember the nonviolent “people power” revolution in the Philippines that brought down the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. Remember the pro-democracy movements in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia that ousted communist regimes in 1989. Remember the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa that brought an end to white minority rule.

Even the 2011 revolution in Egypt demonstrated the extraordinary power of nonviolent action. Yes, there was some violence in Cairo, much of it apparently instigated by agent provocateurs and security forces. But most of the time, the Egyptian crowds in Tahir Square were peaceful. They did not take up arms against the government. They did not riot in the streets. They engaged in peaceful, orderly protest. And in just 18 days they were able to topple a dictator who had been in power for 30 years! It is astounding! The unfortunate truth of this non-violent revolution is that the young men and women, who led it, did not become the leaders of their country once Mubarak was out of power. Now, the military is back in power.

Today the eyes of the world are focused on the Ukraine. As you know, stunningly, Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was released from prison yesterday after being held for the past 2 1/2 years. She was clearly weakened and exhausted from her imprisonment as she spoke to thousands encouraging them in their resistance. We shall see if they will find a “Third Way” - the “Jesus Way” - in the Ukraine for change in this time of tumult.

I will submit to you, that Jesus’ “third way” of nonviolent action may not work in all circumstances, but the historical record shows that it is a powerful means of engaging in conflict, and can be used successfully in struggles for justice, human rights, and self-determination.

Perhaps you’ve seen this bumper sticker: “When Jesus said love your enemies, I’m pretty sure he meant don’t kill them.” Indeed! Jesus’ “third way” of nonviolent action offer us a means of confronting our enemies without killing them, without resorting to violence. Would that more Christians would recognize this and embrace Jesus’ “third way” of nonviolence.
Be Loving. Be Just. It seems so simple. In finding a way to follow Jesus, I pray that we will use the “third way,” the nonviolent way of resistance leading to change—within our hearts, our families, our society and this world of ours.

In the words of the late, great peace and justice activist, Coretta Scott King: “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we have an historic opportunity for a great global healing and renewal. If we will accept the challenge of nonviolent activism with faith, courage, and determination, we can bring this great vision of a world united in peace and harmony from a distant ideal into a glowing reality.”

Make it be so. Amen.

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