

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 20, 2011, Epiphany 7, dedicated to Kenley Marie Neverman on her baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“On Retaliation and Loving our Enemies” *

***Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18;
Matthew 5:38-48***

***(Sixth in the sermon series
“Windows into our Souls”)***

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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.

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Today’s Gospel lesson is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount. The "six antitheses" run from 5:21-48. Four of the six were in last week's reading (which I will reflect on sometime in the coming week or two). This week's reading contains the other two, one dealing with retaliation against enemies, the other in regard to loving of enemies.

Following the Beatitudes and the announcement of the Jesus movement as "salt" and "light," the focus of the sermon moves to these six instances in which Jesus pronounces on established law. His purpose is not to establish a "new law", even less a new and improved old community. His purpose is an articulation of life as it is lived in the new community,

which lives the reign of God on earth and what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community."

Matthew 5:38-41 has a tragic history of poor translations and even worse interpretations.

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.

To begin with, we need to acknowledge that Jesus REALLY knows his congregation. When he says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," all the folks on the hillside are able to complete this law from Exodus 21. It reads: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (Ex. 21:24-25) Enough already! We get it!

What would have shocked them is what he says next: *Do not resist an evildoer*. Jesus is **NOT** recommending becoming a doormat; nor is he tolerating domestic violence. First of all, the translation *Do not resist an evildoer* fails to convey the full meaning of the underlying Greek. It would be better translated as, *Do not **violently** resist an evildoer*. This teaching is primarily about non-violence. It is not about giving in to evil.

These passages are tragically misinterpreted because we have forgotten the original society in which Jesus gave these teachings. When Jesus says, "**If anyone . . .**" he and his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that "**anyone**" was. The behaviors Jesus describes - slapping the right cheek; suing; forcing to go a mile - were not the kind of things *anyone* could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do - and did. And, they "did it" to men, women and children who were in the crowd listening to Jesus.

Jesus is teaching a NEW way. He is teaching the way of nonviolent resistance to oppression and evil. He is empowering the powerless to deal with the powerful around them. He offers three quick examples of how to non-violently resist an evildoer - in fact, how to publicly shame and mock an evildoer. Let's look more closely.

Slapping the right cheek. This was done by masters to their servants and slaves or others they wished to control who were poor. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek. The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. This is not about random violence or fighting among friends or enemies. It is about rank, privilege and power. And to preserve one's honor - one's public standing - it is crucial everything must be done according to the socially-accepted protocols. The slave must obediently stand facing you without external coercion. You must strike only the right cheek and only with the back of the right hand. Any variation on this would demonstrate that you were not in control and would be a public loss of face.

Now imagine your overlord has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It appears that you are becoming doubly subservient; doubly accepting your master's authority over you. But you are actually rendering your master powerless!

Turning your head hides your right cheek and presents your left cheek. But the angle of your head will be such that the master can see, but cannot strike your left cheek *with the back of his right hand*. Try this with a friend and you'll see what happens.

Doing this would publicly exposes the master to shame and ridicule. You would appear to be meek and servile; obediently waiting for a second blow. But the Master would be totally helpless. His only options would be to hit you with the *palm* of his right hand, or use his left hand, or walk away.

This would cause him to lose face. Essentially, you have gained “the upper hand.” Jesus is teaching people to practice nonviolence.

Sue you. Peasants did not sue one another. Again, this is about the privileged abusing the poor. Since peasants quite literally only owned the clothes on their backs, being sued for your coat was being sued for the only thing you owned - except for your underwear! Which is what a "cloak" means. Being seen in your underwear is shameful for you. So why not publicly expose the shame which allows someone with wealth and privilege to take away the only thing a poor person owns by going naked! Give him your underwear. Let the person who seeks power of you explain to others why he has made you naked.

Forced to go a mile. Roman soldiers were allowed to conscript civilians to carry their packs, but only for a mile. However, this was no minor inconvenience for anyone who worked and fed their family day by day. Walking a mile with a heavy pack and then back again would mean missing that day's labor, and therefore that day's food for the family. Offering to go a second mile publicly exposes the unjust hardship of being forced to go even one mile, but does so in a way that seems to cooperate while at the same time brings shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing.

Begging and Borrowing. Then, as now, begging and borrowing were complex social interactions that involve negotiating honor and shame, social respect and status, and money. With this teaching, Jesus is addressing those who have resources, and not those who are poor. We learn from this, that his crowds also had people with means, not simply the poor and powerless. The effect of this is to break down the customary social barriers between those who have and those who do not. It changes the social relationship to one of kinship. Jesus is telling us to treat beggars and borrowers as if they were our closest family. In other words, respect, love and care for them.

You know as well as I that people will tell you that non-violence doesn't work, but over the years there have been many countries that have experienced non-violent revolutions: India, Ghana, Guatemala, South Africa, the Philippines and, just last week, Egypt. Let's remember that in the days of Boris Yeltsin, non-violent demonstrators in Russia kept that country from reverting to military dictatorship. People say non-violence isn't practical, but one could make a clear argument that these situations seem to be working out better than their violent alternatives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nonviolence is effective. I am reminded of a story of A.J. Muste, a conscientious objector during World War II, who went on to lead the Fellowship of Reconciliation. When visiting Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955, A.J. entered the King home with armed guards out front. As he came into the King home, he asked Rev. King to gather all his weapons and collect those of the men out front. He said, "I will take these with me. In this war against racism and for civil rights, these weapons will never win this war. Only nonviolence will do that." Nonviolence changed America during the Civil Rights movement.

Love of enemies (vs. 43-48): Someone once said that everything Jesus taught can be found somewhere in the prophets, with one exception: love of enemies.

As we read in Leviticus 19 today, the law commands us to "love of neighbor" (Lev 19:18), but that same command allows for the hating of those outside the tribe. "*You shall not hate anyone . . . of your kin,*" says Leviticus, which means that you may hate those not of your kin. "*You shall not take vengeance . . . against any of your people,*" but those not of your people are fair game.

Not so with Jesus. He offers a teaching on love that is indisputably new, and indisputably counter-intuitive. In the time of Jesus "love" and "hate" were **NOT** understood in terms

of internal emotional states, feelings, or attitudes. Jesus is not asking us to "feel the love" toward our enemies. In one commentary, Bruce Malina writes:

Persons (at the time of Jesus) had little concern for things psychological. . . . words referring to an internal state always connote a corresponding external expression as well. For example, . . . 'to covet' always involved the attempt to take what one desired, hence the word is best translated 'to steal.' " (Bruce Malina as quoted by Dr. George Hermanson)

And so "**to love**" **our enemies** does **NOT** mean to try and feel affection for them. It means to be attached to them; to be devoted to them; to be loyal to them; to be bonded with them; to join one's fate with theirs; to seek for their welfare, their fair and just treatment. And to behave outwardly in ways that correspond with our inner attachment.

Who knows, maybe it would be easier to try and merely "like" our enemies! However, as Jesus points out, God treats God's enemies - the evil and the unrighteous - the same as God's friends - the good and the righteous. Jesus is calling us to do the same. Ought we not to listen and act according to God's plan?

Jesus is pushing the envelope here! Consider this - if we are kind only to those we are close to, aren't we simply repeating what those we hate also do? Where's the merit in doing that? Through the ages, others have said it well: There is no path to love; love is the path.

In the end, Jesus tells his disciples: "*You, all, therefore, will be consummated ones (teleioi) as your Father in heaven is consummation (teleios).*" Typically, we translate this to "be perfect," which many wrongly understand to mean moral purity or moral perfection. It does not mean that. *Teleioi* comes from the word *telos*, which means "**complete, end, goal.**" Although *Telos* is a major word in the New Testament, it is

only used once in the Gospel of Matthew - right here. *Telos* summarizes the Sermon on the Mount to this point: Act in light of the kingdom. Achieve your full maturity. Reflect God's consummation of the universe in daily life.

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* sums this up:

In a word, what I'm saying is, grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

If we really want a window into the soul, it is found in the transparency of truth in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is here for the purpose of being done. It is here so we can glimpse the essence of God and live as if God really matters. So, let's do it. Amen.

* A special thanks and acknowledgement goes to John Petty and the Rev. Dr. George Hermanson for their brilliant insights and commentaries on Matthew 5:38-48, which were utilized in today's sermon.