



SUNDAY SERMON

God's Way is Different (and Difficult)

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 38 to 48.

Jesus said, "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."

May God's limitless love and truth burn in our hearts and show forth in our lives. Amen.

I've been hearing a lot about political resistance lately. Even people in the president's own party are trying to figure out ways to push back against some parts of his agenda—like trying to dismantle the Affordable Care Act before figuring out what should take its place. And if you are someone who has borne the brunt of the president's rhetoric—if you're a woman, or an immigrant, say—then resistance has probably become part of your daily routine.

So I was a bit caught off guard when I read the Gospel for today. We have come to the last part of the Sermon on the Mount, and maybe the hardest part too. Here's how the passage begins: "Jesus said, "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."

Do not resist an evildoer. Really? I can understand Jesus' admonition if what he means is that we should refrain from vengeance. It's human nature to want to hit back, to make the other guy hurt as much as he's hurt us—but vengeance isn't going to make the world better. If we win, when we win, we don't treat the opponent the way they've treated us. We're better than that.

But that isn't what Jesus is saying. He saying—or at least, it sounds like he's saying—don't even resist an evildoer. Just turn aside, passively, and take the abuse. Turn the other cheek.

Remember, each of the examples Jesus gives is supposed to be something an evil person is doing to you. This isn't about charity. The person taking your coat, and maybe your cloak, isn't a needy person who is cold and suffering. No—it's someone—probably a greedy and rapacious creditor—suing you in court because you couldn't pay a debt.

And the business about being forced to go one mile—it was common practice that a Roman soldier could force a peasant to carry his gear for him, but only for one mile. Before the one mile rule came about soldiers would force peasants to carry their stuff for them for the whole day's march—and then leave them stranded twenty miles from home. This was really messing with the economy because it took laborers away from their work for too long, so the empire decided that one mile was the limit.

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DATE

The Seventh Sunday
after the Epiphany
Sun., Feb. 19, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

READINGS

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18
Psalm 119:33-40
I Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

So, put yourself into the mindset of a first-century Jewish peasant—the kind of person so in debt that someone is going to sue you for your coat—and imagine a life suffering under the oppressive boot of the Roman empire. Imagine unscrupulous employers who keep you in line with a swift backhand to the right cheek. And let's listen to what Jesus says about resistance one more time.

First, there's the Greek word that gets translated "resist": *antistenei*. It means to stand against, to oppose, to fight back. It usually implied fighting back forcefully, even violently. Jesus is saying: when an evildoer comes for you—an irate landowner, or a greedy creditor, or a Roman soldier—don't waste your time fighting back with violence. You'll never win. The power balance is too much in their favor.

Instead, try this: when the soldier wants his gear back after one mile—remember, the Empire said he could only force you to go one mile—you just keep going. He'll be confused. His captain might even get on his case. It's like throwing a little sand in the gears of the Roman empire.

And when that creditor sues you for your coat, well, go ahead give him your cloak as well. Those are the only two garments you own, of course—but let your nakedness be a way of exposing the cruelty of a system that leaves the poor with nothing.

And when your superior punishes you with a backhand to the face—the backhand is how you punished an inferior, a slave—then turn the other cheek. Think about that. He can't backhand you anymore. If you turn the other cheek, he'll have to fight you like an equal, with his fists.

So this is admittedly a creative reading of this passage—I'm indebted to theologian Walter Wink for his interpretation, especially in his 2003 book, "Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way." But this reading makes sense to me, because although I do think Jesus did his best to love his enemies, I do not believe he was passive in the face of evil. And I don't believe Jesus is calling us to stand aside and do nothing when we see evil in the world.

And these examples Jesus gives should probably be taken parabolically rather than literally. I think the point is that Jesus is calling us to be clever, to be smart about the tactics we use in opposing evil. Sometimes, a head on fight isn't going to work. Sometimes it's better to subvert the system, to upend the conversation, to change the narrative.

Changing the narrative is what Jesus was all about. In fact, God is always challenging human narratives. Conventional human wisdom says "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"—seems fair, right? And conventional human wisdom says "love your neighbor, and hate your enemies"—makes sense to me.

But God's subversive narrative turns human wisdom on its head. The highest morality we humans seem to be able to achieve on our own is—fairness. If you're good to me, then I'll be good to you. In a perfect human world, everybody would get just exactly what they deserve, no more, no less.

But God's morality is different. God isn't fair. God goes way beyond fair, and God's love is not constrained by a quid pro quo equation. As Jesus says in the Gospel this morning, "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

The subversive thing is to try to love everyone, whether they deserve it or not, whether they've earned it or not. This is the way God in fact loves us, and this is the way God is calling us to love others—even those who aren't particularly easy to love.

The passage from Leviticus this morning goes on and on about protecting and providing for the poor—and the alien. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest ... You shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God."

The poor aren't always easy to love. So often in our eyes the poor make poor choices. And the alien—the refugee and the immigrant invading our land—they're ways are so strange, and their allegiance is elsewhere, and there's not enough to go around for the people who got here first. But God says—love them anyway. And take some of what you've earned, some of the wealth you've been blessed with, and share it with them. And not just charity—share your wealth in such a way that you participate in making this world a place of justice and peace.

The passage we heard from Leviticus today was actually cut short. Here's how chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus concludes: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

I am. This is an attempt at translating the untranslatable name of God—it means something like the breath and being that holds the universe together—I am—being itself—declares that you shall love the alien in your land as yourself. Because somewhere in our bones we remember how terrible it was when we were slaves in Egypt. And we remember how terrible it was when we held slaves ourselves, aliens from foreign lands, here in this country.

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The more alien someone is, you see, the easier it is for us to pretend they're not human at all. We've seen the end result of conventional wisdom and typical human morality—sooner or later it ends with the strong oppressing the weak and spewing lies to justify their greed and cruelty.

God—I am—Being itself—calls us to be better than that. God tells us to turn this story on its head by loving those it's hard to love. The poor. The alien. And then—this is the big ask—the enemy. The evildoer. How do we love them? As Jesus shows us in the Gospel, it's not by standing aside and doing nothing. The first part of loving our enemy, Jesus says, is to pray for them. To pray for God's truth to open their eyes and God's love to break into their heart.

And after we pray, I think, the next step is to keep testifying to the truth. To tell the truth about the poor and the alien. Now that might mean throwing some sand in the gears, trying to trip up an enemy intent on doing harm. And that might mean disarming our enemies by showing them how much God's love surrounds them. Sometimes the most destabilizing, subversive thing is to realize how much you are loved, when you really don't deserve it.

However they behave toward us, our call is to try and overwhelm our enemies with God's limitless love and God's burning, unchanging, undeniable truth.

Amen.