

Not Quite

A sermon preached by
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Texts:

Luke 6:20-31
Matthew 5: 38-42

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All Saints Sunday



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Luke 6:20-31

²⁰ Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said:
"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
²¹ "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
²² "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.
²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.
²⁴ "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
²⁵ "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.
²⁶ "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.
²⁷ "But I say to you that listen,
 Love your enemies,
 do good to those who hate you,
²⁸ bless those who curse you,
 pray for those who abuse you.
²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;
and from anyone who takes away your coat
do not withhold even your shirt.
³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you;
and if anyone takes away your goods,
do not ask for them again.
³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Matthew 5: 38-42

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said,
"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
³⁹ But I say to you,
 Do not resist an evildoer.
 But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,
 turn the other also;
⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you
 and take your coat, give your cloak as well;
⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile,
 go also the second mile.
⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you,
and do not refuse anyone who wants to
borrow from you.



We hear this scripture from Luke's Gospel this morning, I'm pretty certain, not for the first time. It's familiar to most of us. It includes The Golden Rule – "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Not an original teaching of Jesus – a saying, an "ethic of reciprocity," which has been around for many thousands of years.

It's a key component of Islam and Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, Judaism and the Baha'i Faith.

But Jesus takes a different spin on what it means to treat others. This teaching must fit in with his requirement that we love one another. It must fit in with his constant reminder that we must resist evil. It must fit with his insistence that peace is the only way to live. It must fit in with who he wants us to be. Luke and Matthew both give us these sayings of Jesus – with just a little different understanding of them

And I suggest to you this morning that this scripture is *not quite* what we might think it is ...

[Note: Most of the balance of this sermon is taken from the teachings of Walter Wink. The Sunday I preached it, I spoke mostly extemporaneously using notes from "A Third Way" a well-known article by Dr. Wink which I've reproduced for us here. The highlighted portions are the focus of the sermon.]



Biography

Dr. Walter Wink is Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City. A former parish minister, Walter has taught at Union Theological Seminary and was a Peace Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. He is a frequent lecturer on peace and justice issues and is the author of many books. He writes frequently for magazines like "Sojourners" and "The Other Side."

"The Third Way"

One of the most misunderstood passages in all of the Bible is Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek. The passage runs this way: "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 one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two."

This passage has generally been understood by people as teaching non-resistance. Do not resist one who is evil has been taken to mean simply let them run all over you. Give up all concern for your own justice. If they hit you on one cheek, turn the other and let them batter you there too, which has been bad advice for battered women. As far as the soldier forcing you to take his pack an extra mile, well are you doing

that voluntarily? It has become a platitude meaning extend yourself.

Jesus could not have meant those kinds of things. He resisted evil with every fiber of His being. There is not a single instance in which Jesus does not resist evil when He encounters it.

The problem begins right there with the word *resist*. The Greek term is *antistenai*. *Anti* is familiar to us in English still, "against," "Anti"-Defamation League. *Stenai* means to stand. So, "stand against." Resist is not a mistranslation so much as an undertranslation. What has been overlooked is the degree to which *antistenai* is used in the Old Testament in the vast majority of cases as a technical term for warfare. To "stand against" refers to the marching of the two armies up against each other until they actually collide with one another and the battle ensues. That is called "taking a stand."

Ephesians 6:13 says, "Therefore put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand (*antistenai*) in that evil day and having done all to stand (*stenai*)."

The image there is not of a punch drunk boxer somehow managing to stay on his feet even though he is being pummeled by his adversary. It is to keep on fighting. Don't retreat. Don't give up. Don't turn your back and flee but stay in there and fight to the bitter end.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist one who is evil," there is something stronger than simply resist. It's do not resist violently. Jesus is indicating do not resist evil on its own terms. Don't let your opponent dictate the terms of your opposition. If I have a hoe and my opponent has a rifle, I am obviously going to have to get a rifle in order to fight on equal terms, but then my opponent gets a machine gun, so I have to get a machine gun. You have a spiral of violence that is unending.

Jesus is trying to break that spiral of violence. Don't resist one who is evil probably means something like, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Don't become what you oppose. The earliest translation of this is probably in a version of Romans 12 where Paul says, "Do not return evil for evil."

Jesus gives three examples of what He means by not returning evil for evil.

1

The first of these is, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Imagine if I were your assailant and I were to strike a blow with my right fist at your face, which cheek would it land on? It would be the left. It is the wrong cheek in terms of the text we are looking at. Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek..." I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a left hook, but that would be impossible in Semitic society because the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave or by a husband to a wife or by a parent to a child or a Roman to a Jew in that period. What Jesus is saying is in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, and turn your other cheek."

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. Furthermore, you can't backhand someone twice. It's like telling a joke a second time. If it doesn't work the first time, it has failed. By turning the other

cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed."

This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity.

2

The second instance Jesus gives is, "If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well." The situation here is dealing with collateral for a loan. If a person was trying to get a loan, normally they would use animals or land as collateral for the loan but the very poorest of the poor, according to Deuteronomy 24:10-13, could hock their outer garment. It was the long robe that they used to sleep in at night and used as an overcoat by day. The creditor had to return this garment every night but could come get it every morning and thus harass the debtor and hopefully get him to repay.

Jesus' audience is made up of debtors -- "If anyone takes you to court..." He is talking to the very people who know they are going to be dragged into court for indebtedness and they know also that the law is on the side of the wealthy. They are never going to win a case. So Jesus says to them, "Okay, you are not going to win the case. So take the law and with jujitsu-like finesse, throw it into a point of absurdity. When your creditor sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well."

They didn't have underwear in those days. That meant taking off the only stitch of clothing you had left on you and standing nude, naked, in court. As the story of Jonah reminds us, nakedness was not only taboo in Israel. The shame of nakedness fell not on the person who was naked, but on the

person who observed their nakedness. The creditor is being put in the position of being shamed by the nakedness of the debtor. Imagine the debtor leaving the courtroom, walking out in the street and all of his friends coming and seeing him in his all-togethers and saying, "What happened to you?"

He says, "That creditor has got all my clothes," and starts walking down to his house. People are coming out of bazaars and alleys, "What happened? What happened?" Everyone is talking about it and chattering and falling in behind him, fifty-hundred people marching down in this little demonstration toward his house. You can imagine it is going to be some time in that village before any creditor takes anybody else to court. What Jesus is showing us in these two examples so far is that you don't have to wait for a utopian revolution to come along before you can start living humanly. You can begin living humanly now under the conditions of the old order. The kingdom of God is breaking into the myths of these people now, the moment they begin living the life of the future, the kingdom of God.

3

Jesus' third example is "If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two." Now these packs weighed 65 to 85 pounds, not counting weapons. These soldiers had to move quickly to get to the borders where trouble had broken out. The military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force the civilian to carry the pack, *but only one mile*. There were mile markers on every Roman road. If -- and this is the part we have left out -- the civilian were forced to carry the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in infraction of military code, and military code was always more strictly enforced than civilian. So Jesus is saying, "All right. The next time the soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Carry it and then when you come to the mile marker, keep going."

The soldier suddenly finds himself in a position he has never been in before. He has always known before exactly what you would do. You would mutter and you would complain, but you would carry it. As soon as the mile marker came, you would drop it. Suddenly, this person is carrying the pack on. The soldier doesn't know why, but he also knows that he is in infraction of military law and if his centurion finds out about this, he is in deep trouble.

Jesus is teaching these people how to take the initiative away from their oppressors and within the situation of that old order, find a new way of being.

It is interesting that Gandhi said, "**Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and His teaching is non-violent, except Christians.**" What Jesus is articulating here is a way of living in the world without violence, a way of overcoming domination in all of its forms by using a way that will not create new forms of violence.

In the past, we have thought we had only two choices, either resist evil or don't resist evil. Jesus seemed to be saying, "Don't resist evil," and, therefore, non-resistance seemed to be the only alternative. Be supine, submit, surrender, flee, give up. It seems as if Jesus were asking us to be a doormat for God, to give up all concern for our own justice as well as the justice of others. Now we see in this passage interpreted in a new light, Jesus is not calling on people to be non-resistant. He is calling on them to be non-violent. He is calling on them to resist, yes, but to resist in a way that is not injurious or harmful to the other person.

In just the last few years, non-violence has emerged in a way that no one ever dreamed it could emerge in this world. In 1989 alone, there were thirteen nations that underwent non-violent revolutions. All of them successful except one, China. That year 1.7 billion people were engaged in national non-violent revolutions. That is a third of humanity. If you throw

in all of the other non-violent revolutions in all the other nations in this century, you get the astonishing figure of 3.34 billion people involved in non-violent revolutions. That is two-thirds of the human race. No one can ever again say that non-violence doesn't work. It has been working like crazy. It is time the Christian churches got involved in this revolution because what is happening in the world is that the world itself is discovering the truth of Jesus' teaching, and here we come in the church, bringing up the rear.

This is the most exciting time a person could imagine to be alive. The gospel has never been more relevant. The world has never been more ready.

[End of Wink article]



It's ***not quite*** the message we have been taught. It's ***not quite*** the message that the generations before us have passed off as the Jesus-message. It's ***not quite*** the be-submissive Jesus that we might have imagined.

We owe it to the saints who have gone before us. We must re-hear; re-interpret, truly re-act to what Jesus says. Resist – no-violently – but resist how ever we can the evils of the world.

Resist the war-makers. Resist the money-driven CEO millionaires that care not a penny about us. Resist the intolerant who put others down. Resist the corporation that makes money from the sweat of the underprivileged and hungry. Resist the oppressor who uses genocide to frighten and control. Resist the government which threatens your security by stripping away your rights. Resist the unloved who try to control who you can and cannot love.

Resist the dominant forces of this world. They are not of God.

For all the saints. Re-hear; re-interpret; react. Resist.

Amen.