

Sermon **Jan 20, 2008**

“Turning the Other Cheek”

Reading: [Sermon on the Plain](#) in the [Gospel of Luke](#):

Luke 6:27-31

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

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Several years ago I taught the 3rd grade Sunday School curriculum “Timeless Themes.” This is the class that teaches our eight year-olds the basics of Biblical literacy. When the week came to introduce them to the teachings of Jesus, the text I just read to you was the one we used: What’s called the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in the Book of Luke. A couple of the little boys in the class didn’t hesitate to offer this commentary: “Turn the other cheek? That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard! Why doesn’t he get a gun? He needs to get a gun!”

My co-teacher and I were nonplussed. What kind of Unitarian Universalist children were these? Despite our attempts to explain the dangers of escalating violence and the tragedy of war, our kids were... unimpressed. And why would they be otherwise? What did they know of violence beyond the cartoon exploits of action heroes and video games? And even if these kids had been unfortunate enough to have witnessed or experienced violence in their homes or in the schoolyard, how could we expect them to grasp, let alone embrace, a message that is pretty much universally rejected by the adults of the world?

Because while Christians around the world claim to admire these words, apart from the Quakers and the Mennonites and Jehovah’s Witnesses, who actually lives them in practice?

And what about those other heroes of non-violent resistance, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King? Around this time of year, every year, I’m troubled by the way we Americans profess to love non-violence. Every year, at the time of Martin Luther King’s birthday, the media and our children’s teachers – and our churches – bring out the images of the great preacher and recordings of his “I Have a Dream” speech. We are shown footage of protesters singing or going limp as they are beaten and dragged off to jail. Then the newscast moves on to the next story of an execution, a drive-by shooting, the latest genocide or the deployment of more troops to the latest war zone.

It seems like an insult to the memory of Dr. King and to the convictions for which he died that we continue to pay lip service to those principles at the same time that we violate them. I ask myself how this can be. Do we really admire the teachings of Jesus,

of Gandhi and of King and just somehow fail to live up to them? Or are we only pretending to believe in non-violence? Is the reality of what we believe – that might makes right -- at odds with what we merely think we **ought** to believe? If we believe that war *is* the answer, why not have the guts and integrity to admit it? To *admit* that we think that the doctrine of non-violence is a lot of hokey – or at least a tactic whose day is past?

The Black Power Movement that was on the rise at the time of King's assassination thought so. The civil rights legislation of the '60s had passed and yet the quality of life of African-Americans caught in the web of poverty, especially urban poverty, continued to worsen. Radicals like the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam were less patient than Dr. King and less confident in the power of moral suasion and the inherent decency of the white majority. Black Panther member George Jackson said of the nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"The concept of nonviolence is a false ideal. It presupposes the existence of compassion and a sense of justice on the part of one's adversary. When this adversary has everything to lose and nothing to gain by exercising justice and compassion, his reaction can only be negative."

The irony is that, in the last three years of his life, after seeing for himself the conditions of Blacks living in northern ghettos, so resistant to appeals to justice, King came to reject reliance on the capacity for moral outrage of those in power. In the early years of his leadership in Montgomery and Selma, Dr. King taught his followers that the point of nonviolent resistance is not to humiliate the opponent, but instead to gain his friendship and understanding. Further, the use of boycotts and methods of non-cooperation, were the "means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent." The result was redemption and reconciliation instead of the bitterness and chaos that came from violent resistance.

In the face of a more insidious form of racism than he had encountered in the South, King stated, "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values." Northern whites, he wrote, were practicing nothing less than "psychological and spiritual genocide."

The reconstruction of society that Dr. King was advocating toward the end of his life recognized the interconnectedness of economic and racial justice, American foreign policy and world peace. What I find tremendously moving about this vision is its refusal to be paralyzed by the complexity of these enmeshed forms of injustice.

Today we see the despair of our inner cities, the failure of our schools, the retreat into a violent world of drugs and gangs in this country; the quagmire of Iraq and the seeming impossibility of peace in the Middle East and Africa; global warming and the extinction of species... and it is just too much. Where to begin to chip away at an exploitative and corrupt system that puts profit before human dignity and mutual

survival? We throw up our hands and turn on the latest reality TV show, unable to bear the reality outside our windows. Martin Luther King had the courage to envision a new world, as did Gandhi, as did Jesus.

How is it possible to feel that anything you or I can do will make a difference? How is it possible to hope? Is non-violence even an option in such a violent world? Put another way... Is love possible in a world of hate?

For the visions of both King and Jesus were founded on an ethic of love. Not the sentimental or self-satisfied love of the martyr that too many of us attribute to these two, but a revolutionary love that refuses to accept the oppressor's terms of engagement. This is the true nature of non-violent resistance.

To get back to those eight year-olds' disgust at the "turn the other cheek" method of responding to violence... I wouldn't have gone so far as to suggest that Jesus should have recommended to his followers that they all run out and purchase a handgun. But, really... What kind of advice is this – to turn the other cheek? What is that going to get you but two slaps instead of one? What's so great about non-violence if it just gets you beaten up? If this is non-violent resistance, what's resistant about it? Isn't this the same Christian teaching that glamorizes suffering, requires women to stay in abusive marriages and encourages the poor and enslaved to accept their lot with humility? I thought there must be something more to the story, so I did a little research. Here's what I found.

Non-violent resistance is not the same thing as passivity. According to Biblical scholar Walter Wink, Jesus, or the authors of Matthew and Luke, chose his words very carefully to teach a slyly effective form of resistance peculiar to his time and place. Jesus, and later, his disciple Martin Luther King, taught us how to seize the moral initiative – a third way to respond to danger. Not fight or flight – violence or passivity – but a third alternative, a strategy of refusal.

"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." This is a predominantly right-handed world, Walter Wink reminds us. Look at your neighbor and imagine hitting him or her on the right cheek. The only way for a right-handed person to do that is with a back-handed slap. Now in the ancient world of Roman-occupied Israel in which Jesus lived, a back-handed slap was not a fighting blow, but an insult. It was the way that a superior reprimanded an inferior. This was the way a husband admonished a wife, a parent a child... or a Roman citizen, a Jew. It was a way to humiliate someone and to remind that person of his or her proper place.

For the inferior to retaliate in such a world would be suicide. To cower and beg would be to surrender one's dignity. But by turning the other cheek – the left cheek – the man or woman being struck left their assailant with two equally unacceptable choices: to strike with the fist, which would be equivalent to recognizing the other as having equal status, a worthy opponent, as opposed to a subordinate – or to use the left hand. The left hand in this society was considered unclean, as it still is in many parts of the world today, and to even gesture with the left hand was forbidden. Turning the other cheek – the left

cheek -- restored control of the situation to the Jew struck by the Roman soldier, rendering the soldier powerless. It said, in effect, "I deny you the power to humiliate me." This was more than non-violence and more than resistance; it was non-violent resistance.

By the same token, the instruction, "from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt," was intended to use subtle mockery to undermine the power of the rich man who had received your cloak as collateral for a loan – the only collateral that the poorest man typically had to offer. Jewish law required the lender in this case to return the cloak by sunset regardless of whether the loan had been repaid or not. Otherwise the poor man would have no protection from the cold. If the creditor should refuse to return your cloak, Jesus advises, give him your shirt as well. In ancient Hebrew culture, nakedness shamed not the naked person but the one who beheld him. Thus the seemingly selfless act of giving the shirt off your back is actually a way to claim the moral initiative – to take the power of the oppressor and turn it against him.

Do you see the origins of the American civil rights movement in these techniques? If you force the police to drag your unresisting body to the police van, if you flood the jails with protestors, if you refuse to move when the lunch counter attendant tells you to leave, you turn the power of the oppressive system against itself. You don't run from the police; that would be to capitulate. You don't fight back; that would be to endorse the same violent methods you resist. But to stand your ground, non-violently, is to seize control of the exchange, to assert your dignity and self-respect and courage.

This is an understanding of non-violence that is truly radical. It is anything but passivity.

But is this kind of resistance, courageous and effective as it was in the nineteen sixties, even possible today? Protestors continue to employ it, on a much smaller scale, to be sure. But it is a tactic of the powerless. Can you imagine non-violent resistance being used on a large scale, by a powerful force? Can you imagine the United States, for instance, responding with non-violent resistance to a terrorist attack? Never. What would have happened, for instance, if we had responded to the attacks of 9/11 by dropping food and medical supplies on Afghanistan instead of bombs? If we had refused to let al-Qaeda define us as a ruthless super-power intoxicated by its own materialism and contemptuous of Islamic life? If we had shamed them in the eyes of the world by turning the other cheek? Even to suggest such a thing is unthinkable. So much for being the Christian country that some would insist we are.

In the memoir *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*, the author Geoffrey Canada writes of growing up in the South Bronx, one of the most violent places in the United States. He believes, in spite of his personal experiences with living in the war zone that is the South Bronx, that human beings are not innately violent. He believes that violence must be learned. In that world, violence is necessary for survival. To refuse to fight is to seal your fate as a victim. Fights are orchestrated as a way to find yourself in the pecking order of young men and as a way of forming alliances. This is no different than in my sister's

herd of goats, in a flock of chickens, in a troop of primates, in any group of animals, including human beings. The difference is that in the world of the Bronx, if you find yourself at the low end of that pecking order, you may die.

This wasn't always the case. Your life might be made a living hell, but you probably wouldn't die. The universal availability of guns changed all that. If you fail to assert your dominance in the Bronx – or even if you succeed in establishing yourself as someone to be respected and feared -- you no longer get beaten up; you get shot. The elaborate rules by which gangs once operated, the code of honor that ruled the streets, becomes irrelevant when anyone – anyone – can obtain a gun and can take your life without fighting you, or even looking you in the eye. Where does non-violent resistance fit into this picture?

And on the world scale... When anyone with enough money can buy the weapons that let him seize control of a people, that let him terrorize an entire population – When anyone ruthless enough to massacre civilians or to kidnap children and press them into service as human shields or cannon fodder -- When anyone with internet access can build a bomb that will kill or maim hundreds – Where does non-violent resistance fit into this picture? Where does the vision of Martin Luther King or, for that matter, of Jesus, fit into this picture?

Geoffrey Canada refuses to fight, except to save his life; he refuses to flee, even though he could turn his back on the neighborhood of his childhood. He believes that we can change the hearts of our children, that we can teach them alternatives to violence, that we can save their lives. We can teach them peacemaking skills; we can get the guns off the street and out of the schools by holding their manufacturers and sellers accountable for how they are used. He believes that our children need us to be heroic; that we owe them a sense of safety and security that they are entitled to as children and that can only be provided by us, the adults. Canada believes that there is a third way: an alternative to our primitive instincts of fight or flight. That we can face down our children's predators, much as Dr. King faced down the bullwhips and billy clubs, the police dogs and the jeering crowds. He believes that we can refuse to be defined by hatred – our own or others' – that an ethic of love, practiced with courage and determination, can still save our children and our country.

And what of the world? As in the Bronx, the weapons are deadlier than ever, and the old rules of war no longer apply. The code of honor, the rules of engagement, are no longer recognized as relevant by many.

Can we face down the roadside explosives, the torture chamber and the executioner, the sniper and the stealth bomber? We have no choice but to believe that we can. We can refuse to be the arms dealer of the world. We can refuse to support dictators, to practice torture in secret prisons, to kill civilians or to invade countries to secure access to cheap oil. We can refuse to put profit before justice.

This quaint idea of non-violent resistance – it needs to be re-imagined and re-interpreted. New ways of acting morally in the face of violence **must** be explored. Turning the other cheek does not mean running from injustice or evil acts. It means asserting our self-respect, reclaiming control over the terms of engagement and refusing to abase ourselves by resorting to those same evil acts that we deplore. It means insisting – insisting again and yet again – that we will not be brutes, bullies or dealers of death.

If we come to rule the world – our “block” in this ever-shrinking neighborhood of the world – by instilling fear in others, we will have won supremacy but lost our souls. Turning the other cheek – non-violent, intelligent and effective resistance to evil – is a skill it is not too late to master. If we cannot do this, our lives will not be worth saving.

Hear once more the words of Martin Luther King, the words with which we began this service:

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in [a] revolution of values... We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. And history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate...

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace... If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world.

Amen.