

Matters of Love and Hate  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

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Last call! Yes, if you don't like the idea of loving enemies, or praying for those who persecute you, this morning's Gospel lesson will not appear in lectionary readings again for twenty-one years. Last call, though I hope you will continue to study the creative responses to evil and persecution Jesus offers in this portion of his Sermon on the Mount, where once again he begins a teaching with the phrase, "You have heard it said..." and then recites a portion of Jewish law, or this morning, statutes of the ruling Roman empire to which Jews would have to submit. He then gives them an alternative response that maintains dignity.

I have often heard people argue for aggressive punishment by quoting the Scripture, "an eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth." Most forget Jesus did not condone this rule. The Jewish law of "eye for an eye" may sound harsh to us; yet, known as *lex talionis*, it was actually a progressive change as it set limits on unbridled punishment such as two eyes and a leg for an eye injury. It mandates equal retribution, or proportionate justice for an evil inflicted. In fact, in Jesus' time, such retribution was moving toward our current practice of awarding monetary damages rather than imposing physical impairment. [Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013) p. 111]

We will also hear Jesus talk of going the second mile, which we can hear as a positive image, similar to giving 110%. Yet, Jesus is referring to the right of a Roman soldier or official to demand a person carry their pack one mile. One either obeyed or faced arrest or a fine. We will look at the curious consequence of Jesus teaching his followers to carry the pack a second mile.

Finally, most biblical translations word the opening verse of our lesson 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 an evildoer [or evil person, or those who want to hurt you.]* Along with other biblical scholars, Warren Carter notes the word Jesus uses for resist has a military connotation that involves violence, and suggests a clearer translation is, "do not violently resist an evildoer." I will read the verse with that addition, thus affirming Jesus did stand against evil. [Carter, Warran, Matthew and the Margins, (Orbis Press, Maryknoll, NY, 2005), p. 151]

Let us hear another section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-48:

***“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 [violently] 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 God in heaven; who makes the 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 God in heaven is perfect.*

Over thirty years ago, during a Bible study, one member suggested, “When we are hurt or threatened, Christians often revert to the Old Testament teaching of an eye for an eye, or worse.” I think he was right. When wronged, we often react with anger, seeking ways to strike back, either with hateful words or vengeful action. Nations are particularly prone to vengeance, though perhaps in part because leaders believe their citizens want it. We are not immune from the mantra, “Don’t get mad, get even!”

I believe Jesus was keenly aware of human emotion and our tendency to react in hateful or violent ways. Those in that gathered crowd on a hillside, were the most prone to being abused or demeaned by their own people and by Roman authorities, and likely were powerless in the justice system. Jesus’ teaching moves them past revenge, and even past proportionate justice to a different, and quite creative response to evil.

This teaching of Jesus has been and can be interpreted in such a way that encourages submission to evil and violence. Often such an interpretation is promulgated by the powerful and the privileged, the abusive and the oppressive, to maintain power and control. Quoting Jesus, “Well, you know the Jesus you follow said to ‘turn the other cheek,’” attempts to keep in line the powerless and the disenfranchised, the abused and the oppressed, using Jesus’ own words. And on the other side, progressive Christians have used the same words to promote an inactive passivism that failed to acknowledge and evil. In fact, Jesus both condemned violent resistance to evil, and called for resisting evil and abuse.

Jesus had a passion to preserve the dignity of those against whom evil was purveyed. Jesus does not say, “Don’t get mad, get even,” but neither does he say, “Let people abuse, demean, and walk all over you.” Our lesson includes creative options for maintaining one’s dignity.

While perhaps better examined in a Bible study, Jesus' example of turning the other cheek if hit on the right cheek assumes a knowledge of Middle Eastern cultural practice. Walter Wink explains that to hit someone on the right cheek, one can throw a punch with one's left hand. But wait, in Jesus' day, the left hand was used for... personal hygiene, or to put it bluntly, toileting. So, the strike on the right cheek to which Jesus refers would be done with the right hand, and for that to happen it has to be with the back of one's hand.

In that culture, such a slap was done by a superior to an inferior, a purposeful act of power and humiliation, intended to remind one of their lower place and who was in charge. Yet, what does it mean to turn the other cheek, the left cheek? Walter Wink suggests one would only strike an equal on the left cheek. Thus, to turn the other cheek, to offer the left cheek, Jesus is telling his listeners to challenge the evil doer to treat one as an equal. More than likely it was a challenge that would not be accepted because of the equality it would imply. [Walter Wink video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUC3IAhJs8c>]

In a different way, Jewish law allowed that one could sue another person for a debt, and for the very poor, it could come down to being for the literal coat off their back. The law stipulated the coat would need to be returned at night to protect the debtor from the cold. Curiously, Jesus suggests one should not only give one's coat, but one's cloak, one's undergarment as well.

Now, I can envision Jesus offering this advice with a straight face which belies a dry humor in which the poor person stands in the courtroom and says, "Okay, you want my coat, why not take everything. Here's my undergarment as well; in fact, I will just strip off everything!"

Now in this country we arrest people for public nudity, but I understand in biblical culture it was as much an offense to be caught looking at a naked person as to be naked. So, all of a sudden the poor one, who is being sued, is now turning the tables and exerting some degree of control, and even maintaining a degree of dignity, though admittedly in a quite creative and intriguing way.

Jesus' instruction to go a second mile carrying a soldier's pack is another innovative way to exert a degree of control when one has been legally demeaned. There was a Roman rule that limited such conscriptions to one mile, and there were fines and reprimands for any soldier or official caught either asking or making someone carry the pack further than one mile. Here again, Jesus' suggestion to go the second mile turns the tables and puts the soldier on the defensive. Imagine what a Roman soldier or official would answer if seen with a person walking past the one mile marker: "Oh, I didn't make him carry it, he just volunteered to go the second mile." Right! A Jew carrying your pack more than a mile, voluntarily? Jesus is not saying one carries the pack a second mile because one wants to, but as a way to reclaim one's own dignity and control when one has been demeaned.

In these three examples – turning cheek, giving up one’s cloak, going a second mile – Jesus is not condoning passive acquiescence to evil, but encouraging active, creative ways of resistance to maintain one’s dignity as a person. It is what Martin Luther King, Jr. meant when he wrote, “...the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had.” [King, Martin Luther, Jr., in “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” Chicago, 1960, as found at: [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/pilgrimage\\_to\\_nonviolence/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/pilgrimage_to_nonviolence/)]

Yet, my struggle with these teachings of Jesus is it is so hard to put them into practice on our own. I think it takes a community of faith for us to help each other develop creative, non-vengeful resistances to evil, while upholding our integrity and dignity.

This community creativity can help us move into Jesus challenging words on loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute, demean, oppress, embarrass or abuse us. Jesus’ teaching is not completely new, for while the psalmist can call upon harsh retribution for enemies, wisdom literature, including Proverbs, is open to reconciliation.

I believe it is almost always beyond our ability or wisdom to figure out what will make an evil person change her or his ways. So, praying for enemies begins with saying to God and oneself, “This situation, this person is beyond my power to change. I can control my own actions and reactions, and maintain my own dignity, but God, I will turn over the rest to you.”

If we do so, I suspect we will surprise ourselves, and perhaps find we are showing love to someone to whom we never thought we could love. We might even find that people who have wronged us have shown up in our prayers, not just our nightmares. Out of this comes a feeling of thanksgiving, that God has reached us, reached within us, and given us the courage, not to acquiesce, but to exert control.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount contains teachings for how the community of faith is to live in harmony with each other, but also within the reality of an oppressive political and social culture. In his, “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” method, there is a real sense in which Jesus is saying there is evil and there is a non-violent way to resist evil; there is the law and there is my way of the Spirit; there are statutes and there is my filter of love;.

Jesus’ final words in today’s lesson were, “Be perfect, as your God in heaven is perfect.” The call to be perfect is way beyond our scope, but the challenge before us is to recognize we are called to be better than those who resist violence with violence, or harbor hate for enemies. Jesus teaches us we are better than that, we can be better than that, we will be better than that. And if we say we can’t, we might ask who will?