

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 24, 2019
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 45:1-11, 24-28
Psalm 37:1-18
I Corinthians 15:35-50
Luke 6:27-38

Our Gospel lesson today is the second part of Jesus' *Sermon on the Plain* from which Pastor John preached last week. It's Luke's version of Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount*.

As I've mentioned before, the Gospel writers portray Jesus as a "new" Moses. One of the parallels they employ involves geography. In the Old Testament, Moses would go up Mount Sinai to speak with God, and then would descend the mountain in order to speak to the people (cf. Exodus 19:25; 32:15; 34:29-32). Moses also set up twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel (Ex. 24:4).

In a similar manner, Jesus, before beginning the *Sermon on the Plain*, goes up the mountain to pray and to talk with God. He then comes down the mountain to teach, and before doing so he chooses the twelve apostles (Luke 6:13, 17).

Now Moses was a great prophet, the one through whom God gave the children of Israel the Law that helped them live as God's covenant people. But Jesus, as the "new" Moses, is even greater, and his teaching takes the Law of Moses and *expands* it to levels that still give people "pause" today.

Today's text brings this reality to us front and center.

Jesus says, "Love your enemies."

These words are shocking to us, but they were no less shocking to Jesus' disciples and those gathered to hear him.

Think about this for a moment. Who would be the enemies of the people to whom Jesus is speaking? Answer: The hated Romans. The occupiers. The oppressors.

Now the disciples have been listening to Jesus teach a lot about the Kingdom of God. Ideas about the "Kingdom" of God must have set in motion in their minds the idea that Jesus had come to lead a revolt against the hated Romans. It would have been quite normal for the disciples to think and to hope that Jesus had come to overthrow their hated oppressors.

But now, Jesus says in effect: "Love your hated oppressors."

I can imagine their reply: "Lord, show us what that looks like! *How* do we do that?"

Jesus says: "*Do good to them, bless them, and pray for them.*" Jesus is again expanding the Old Covenant requirement, and he will fulfill this standard himself when he prays for those who crucify him (Luke 23:34).

But there is more. And here is where things get really interesting. Jesus then says: “*To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.*” Two thousand years later, followers of Jesus are still asking what this means.

Is Jesus calling for his followers to be completely passive when they experience abuse or violence? On the surface, this appears to be the case, even to the point of Jesus encouraging his followers to facilitate *more* violence against themselves.

To unpack this, it is important that we read the text through its first century Jewish context. In Jesus’ day, when a person wanted to assert dominance or authority over another person (such as a Roman soldier would do to an Israelite), the customary way to do it would be to slap the person in the face with the back of the hand. This was a way for the aggressor to show the person he slapped that he was completely inferior. It was a gesture of contempt, like how one would treat a slave.

Given this reality, Matthew’s version of this story makes more sense to us. As Matthew tells it, Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the *right* cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Mt. 5:39)

If a person who was struck did this, the person who just hit them would now be in a bind. In order to slap the person who has turned the other cheek, he would have to use his left hand. But the left hand was considered “unclean” and was

never used, so a backhand strike to the other cheek with the left hand was not an option. A soldier *could* slap the person with an *open* hand, or punch him, but this was only done to those considered equals.

So when Jesus says, “turn the other cheek,” what is he saying? I think that Jesus is saying to his disciples that when you are treated with contempt or even violence, **do not fight back – but do not run or acquiesce, either**. Instead, *stand your ground and turn the other cheek*. In doing this, you are saying to the other person: “*I refuse to cooperate with the world in which you are living.*”

By responding in this way, you “mirror” the violent person’s behavior back to him, hoping to lure him into a different moral and spiritual space. You refuse to be treated as inferior.

Turning the other cheek, then, does not mean responding to violence with violence. But neither is it complete passivity. It involves standing your ground and showing the aggressor a different way – the Kingdom way.

You may ask, “Pastor, what would this look like in our practical day to day experience?”

Let me give you two examples. I heard a story about Desmond Tutu, who served as Archbishop of the Anglican church in South Africa many years ago during the reign of Apartheid. One day Bishop Tutu, then a young priest, was

walking down a raised wooden sidewalk. The sidewalk was under construction and was narrow, and it was extremely muddy on both sides.

Walking toward him was a white man who was a racist. The man stopped and looked at Bishop Tutu and said: “Get off the sidewalk. I don’t make way for Guerillas.”

Bishop Tutu stepped off the sidewalk, politely gestured to the man and replied: “I do.”

Another example of turning the other cheek involves a story about Mother Teresa. She was holding a starving child by the hand and went into a bakery on the streets of Calcutta. She approached the baker and asked him for a loaf of bread for the child.

The baker approached her, looked her in the eye, and spat full in her face.

Mother Teresa smiled and responded: “I thank you for your gift for me. Now, how about something for this starving child?”

In both cases, Bishop Tutu and Mother Teresa did not fight back. *But they did not flee or acquiesce.* By their words and actions they “mirrored” the offending person’s behavior back to him, and in this provocative way invited their aggressor into a different spiritual space. In their humorous way, they invited their aggressor to rise up and occupy the moral high ground. They refused to be treated

as inferior. [For more about this interpretation, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination.*]

Love your enemies, Jesus says. Do good to them; bless them; pray for them. Notice he does not say, “Feel a certain way.” Love is not a feeling. Love is to will the good of the other, and then to pursue that good.

Some might say: “But pastor, this is so hard. It’s an almost impossible standard. How can we possibly live up to this?”

The answer comes in verse 35 of our Gospel lesson. God is merciful and loving, even to His enemies. And God is concerned with making us his children, sons and daughters of the Most High.

Let me ask: How do children become like their parents? **By acting like and imitating their parents!**

God says, “I am your Father, I have made you my children. Children share in the life of their Father. I am loving and merciful to all, including my enemies. This is my nature. This is who I am and what I do. And as my children, I won’t have you behaving otherwise.

God’s very life in us – God’s empowering grace – enables us to do *by grace* what we are unable to do in our own human strength.

As we come to the Lord’s Table, the grace you receive here may not help you to *feel* a certain way toward others. But it can help you to *will* the good of

others, to pray for them, to bless them, and to pursue the good for them insofar as you are able.

If you desire that kind of grace, the invitation remains open, and Jesus stands ready to give it to us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.