

October 12, 2014
Matthew 5:38-42
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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WISDOM FOR CHANGE

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

The chaplain at MidCoast Hospital invites local clergy to gather at the hospital a couple of times a year for conversation around a particular topic. This fall the conversation was about domestic violence and the speaker was from the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence. At one point we talked about ways we could be helpful. After a while I realized that the things we were suggesting were things that could be done by any agency.

I suggested that I thought that the most important thing we, as churches, could do was to address the parts of our own tradition that make it difficult for individuals, families and culture as a whole to address what is really happening.

For example, we need to consider passages of scripture that trip up people of faith, who are experiencing domestic violence. One advocate who works in this field told me that many of her clients who speak about their faith say that they feel caught because they are supposed to “turn the other cheek.”

So today we’ll read this passage and spend some time exploring what it has to say. We find this phrase in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, with his disciples, is exploring the teachings of their Jewish faith tradition in light of their contemporary context.

SERMON

Let’s start with the way we will end:

A human body is a gift.
A human soul is sacred.
A human being is a blessing.

That means an eye, and a tooth, are both pretty precious. When the Jewish community, thousands of years ago, first began to teach an “eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” it was actually a step in the direction of a more peaceful existence. In very ancient times, before this practice, punishment often exceeded the crime. Over time the moral understanding developed that the punishment should not exceed the crime. So maybe we should say, “*Only one* eye for an eye, and *only one* tooth for a tooth.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes that teaching and invites us even further in the direction of peace, as he does

throughout his ministry. On the surface what he suggests seems naive and foolish, even insulting. We should stand up for ourselves, shouldn't we? Yes, we should. So why does he say this? As we explore the cultural context of his time, I think we will see that this is one of his "wise as a serpent, gentle as a dove" teachings. Jesus is a spiritual genius.

For a moment, first let's remind ourselves of the realities of domestic violence, which has been in the headlines a lot recently as the National Football League, the military, and college campuses struggle with their own policies.

Domestic Violence, often referred to these days as Intimate Partner Violence, is a tragedy of monumental proportions affecting all our lives, either directly or indirectly. Studies indicate that

- 1 in 4 women will experience this violence in their lifetime
- over 3 million children nationwide witness this violence each year
- it is the third leading cause of homelessness among families.
- economically, it costs over \$37 billion dollars a year for law enforcement, legal work, medical costs and lost productivity.

For many of us here this is not a theoretical conversation. Many people know the pain of this violence, and other forms of family violence, all too well. As we talk today, let us hold one another in prayer and tenderness.

So, why would Jesus say such things as turn the other cheek and go the extra mile? What was he thinking?

First of all, these are not about private, "behind closed doors" situations; these refer to public encounters, which in his day would have been primarily between men. Also, remember that he and the disciples are Jews under the thumb of the Roman occupiers. People who live in those circumstances sometimes become terrorists. Or they might become wise as serpents, while being gentle as doves, in subversive ways.

What Jesus suggests is meant to provide an experience of shock to the person who started the encounter, with the hope that the shock will bring about change. He hopes to shift the dynamics so that a new possibility opens up - a "change of heart" for all of the people involved in the situation. He encourages the disciples to be agents of peace - in a subversive way.

We'll come back to the strike on the cheek, but first let's consider the other two.

To give someone your cloak as well as your coat. These were typically a man's only items of clothing, so you would then bewell...naked. How shocking! You might get one of them back pretty quickly.

To go the second mile after you have been forced to go the first. This refers to the law that a Roman soldier could force any Jew to carry his pack for a mile, but

was forbidden to have him carry it any further, at the risk of disciplinary action. Imagine the shock on the soldier's face when the human-pack-mule offers to go a second mile!

So what about - *If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also?*

Generally we have been taught that this implies we should be passive. However, theologian Walter Wink in his book *Engaging the Powers* gives us a nuanced perspective on the cultural context that turns this phrase upside down.

Why would it be just the right cheek? Because, it alludes to a backhanded strike on the cheek that was an act of insult more than of injury. The backhanded slap was particularly used against someone of a lower class to assert one's dominance. So why only the right cheek? Because a person would only use their right hand to interact with another person.

To explain this is rather indelicate, but in those days the left hand was the toilet hand. So when you turn the other cheek, your left cheek, the person is in a dilemma. Now to backslap they have to use their left hand, for which there are powerful social taboos. If they continue with their right hand they have to slap you with an open palm which was considered an act of equals. The person who has turned the other cheek is demanding to be treated as an equal. What a shocking turn of events!

All these subversive acts are meant to open the eyes of the one who has started the confrontation. For there to be peace, things have to change.

We can see the insidiousness of power and control violence when we realize that these passages have too often been corrupted to keep people in their place, and too often that message has come from the church itself.

"Turning the other cheek" is actually a call to action, a call to liberation, a call to stand up for oneself, to act in a way that provides a shock to the system, to act for change, for the good of everyone. It is wisdom for change.

Over the centuries, these teachings have been powerful resources for groups of people struggling with systemic injustice, who collectively support one another to use nonviolent resistance in the face of injustice. A good example of that is the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr. once commented about this passage, "violence ... as a means of achieving racial justice is impractical...the ...law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind." (*The Words*) He and others used subversive nonviolence to confront the white power structure with their own injustice. It was shocking.

A contemporary example of an individual who is using this kind of subversive act is a young woman who is a student at Columbia University. Last year she

reported an act of sexual assault by another student to university authorities. In protest at what she considers the university's inaction she is now carrying a dorm mattress around campus with her. People are shocked. And people are talking.

It takes wisdom, including subversive wisdom, and support - lots of it - for people to change their lives in the midst of intimate partner violence. It is crucial that we not turn a blind eye, either in public policy or in personal encounters. In today's bulletin there are suggestions of things to say and things not to say, as well as the hotline number in Maine (1-866-834-4357). In addition, there will be two advocates from local agencies meeting with us in Fellowship Hall after church today to answer questions and to talk further about how we can be agents of change, instruments of peace.

We end the way we began:

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