

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK – REALLY?

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October 28, 2019; Non-Lectionary Sermon

Leviticus 24:10-23; Matthew 5:38-48

“But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...”

Matthew 5:39b

This has been a disturbing week in this country of ours, when it comes to violence. First there were the homemade bombs, mailed to more than a dozen people who are prominent in politics. (Thank God the bomber has been found, and arrested.) Then a gunman walked into a supermarket in Louisville, Kentucky and shot two African-American grandparents. He'd been seen earlier that day, trying the doors of an African-American congregation, but was unable to get in. Then, just yesterday, came the news of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh: eleven killed and six injured, at last report — some of the injured being police officers courageously responding to the scene. It's very possible, based on the death toll, that it's the worst anti-Semitic incident in American history.

All this is taking place, of course, in the context of a bitter mid-term election campaign. The heated rhetoric, the pervasive negative ads, the seeming desire of candidates from both sides not only to win, but to utterly destroy their opponents — all this is something new, an intensity of rage we've never seen before.

It troubles me. And I'll tell you what else troubles me, even more: the thought that maybe the angry, vengeful rhetoric we hear from political leaders is filtering down into local communities, poisoning relationships between neighbor and neighbor.

So, this morning's Gospel lesson is timely in so many ways.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches:

“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. 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.” (Matthew 5:38-41)

Let's unpack that passage. Jesus says, “Forget ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ That law's been repealed! There's a new law on the books, a law I'm giving you right now.

Somebody just slap you on the right side of your face? Then, turn your head. Let him slap you on the left cheek as well.

Somebody just steal the coat off your back? Offer her your cloak as well.

And what if one of those Roman soldiers, who's used to calling a Jewish man out of the crowd and saying, “Here, Jew-boy: put on this backpack, and walk

behind me for the next mile.” That was a common-enough thing to happen, in those days of military occupation. The most loutish Roman soldier from a distant province could do exactly that, even with the most distinguished rabbi. The Jews just hated that sort of thing, as you can well imagine.

What Jesus says about it, though, is shocking and surprising. It was shocking and surprising in the first century, and it’s still shocking and surprising today. He says to his disciples, those first Christians: Don’t resist! If a Roman soldier says, “Carry my backpack for a mile,” then you carry his backpack for a mile. But, when you reach the one-mile mark, don’t stop. Keep on going for a second mile as well!

Doesn’t it sounds strange: like maybe Jesus has got a couple screws loose? But there is a certain, ingenious logic to it. If you pull on that Roman backpack, and walk a mile, complaining under your breath with every step, then the Roman soldier has won. He’s succeeded in making you his inferior, his beast of burden. He doesn’t mind if you grumble: in fact, it gives him a secret thrill. That’s exactly what he wants to happen.

Yet, what if....? What if you don’t stop after the first mile but go on for a second one — and what if you do it with a mysterious little smile on your face, instead of a grimace? You’re gonna have that soldier so confused, he won’t know what’s going on! The whole structure of the world, as he sees it, that puts him higher than you on the Imperial pecking-order, no longer applies: because you, by

your bold move, have stepped right out of that pecking-order. Some think choosing the second mile is a mark of abject servitude. I tell you, says Jesus, it's something very different. It's your declaration of independence!

Jesus is bringing in an entirely new ethic. The old ethic no longer applies. That old ethic is called "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," and it's got a distinguished history. Just about every human culture, up till this point, has had something like it.

The oldest occurrence we know of is in the ancient Babylonian law-code, the Code of Hammurabi. What it means is, if someone gouges out your eye, you – or your kinsman – is entitled to track him down and gouge out his eye in revenge. And if he slugs you in the jaw, knocking a tooth out, then you're entitled to haul off and hit him as many times as it takes, until one of his teeth goes flying out as well.

In some cultures — like the Huron culture of North America in the days before the Europeans arrived — this business of officially-sanctioned vengeance was so deeply ingrained that blood-feuds could go on for years, even generations. Sometimes the combatants clean forgot why they were doing it. Getting revenge for that most recent outrage was all that mattered.

What not so many people realize — those who quote the ancient Code of Hammurabi with some admiration — is that Hammurabi didn't write it in order to give vengeance free rein. He wrote it in order to set some limits. His was a brutal empire, and he was a brutal ruler. Retribution — going after the eye of someone who had plucked yours out — was just the way the world operated.

There was no question, to Hammurabi, that one eye had to go, but in drafting his Code, what he was really trying to do was protect the *other* eye. In a society where retribution is the controlling legal principle, the greatest damage to society's equilibrium comes not from vengeance, but from vengeance that goes a little too far — because, then, the world is just as much out of balance, but in the opposite direction. What “An eye for an eye” really means is, “You must stop at just one eye.”

There's a scene from the David Attenborough movie, *Gandhi*, in which the great leader of India's independence movement is in despair. There seems to be no end to the violence between Hindu and Muslim. It's threatening to tear his country apart. It's just “an eye for an eye,” someone explains to him.

“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind,” is Gandhi's reply, in the film. In saying that, he's assuming an ethical position very close to that of Jesus.

Gandhi, by the way, never became a Christian himself, although he studied the New Testament. He expressed great admiration for the teachings of Jesus. In a famous exchange, someone once asked him why, if he liked Jesus so much, he hadn't ever taken the step of becoming a Christian.

The reason he never became a Christian, Gandhi replied, was Christians. If ever he began to see Christians who truly followed Christ, then he'd consider converting.

I can't help but think that maybe it was this teaching of Jesus about turning the other cheek that was in the back of Gandhi's mind. There's no doubt about it: it's a hard teaching. Not many of us succeed in living up to it. All it takes is the smallest flare-up of anger, and all our best intentions of living a peaceful life go out the window.

You know how it goes. There are so many incidents in the course of a week, when you or I feel someone has trampled on our rights, in large ways or small. And we all know where this is most likely to happen: *when driving a car*. Someone passes us in a dangerous way, then immediately slips into the lane in front of us, then immediately slows down.

Doesn't that just drive you nuts? Doesn't that make you want to just swing the wheel to the left, lean on the accelerator, go zooming past the miserable offender, then pull right in front of them and slow down, yourself?

I know what you're thinking, in those situations. And I'll tell you how I happen to know it. It's because, more often than not, I'm thinking the very same thing! I'm not proud to say it, but I am.

The urge to vengeance is almost universal. We all feel its insistent tug, we hear its seductive whisper: "Are you going to let that person get away with it?"

The problem is, you and I so often mix up justice and vengeance in our minds. We imagine, for all practical purposes, they're one and the same. And so, we have this bizarre practice, in our legal system, of allowing family members of the victim to testify at the sentencing stage of a murder trial. Why should that have any outcome on the judge's decision about sentencing? If the victim's family is sitting in the front row with tear-streaked faces, then should the judge's decision be any different than that in another murder trial in the courtroom next door, in which the victim had no family — or the family decided not to come?

I'll tell you why our justice system allows it. It's vengeance. On one level or another, our culture still believes in "an eye for an eye," two thousand years after Jesus definitively stated it's not the way we ought to be living our lives.

The problem with casually accepting vengeance — as simply the way the world works — is that the effects of vengeance are not limited to the original offender. It affects the person seeking vengeance as well.

No one's said this better than the Presbyterian preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner, in a little quotation that's been much used — probably over-used — but that still wraps it all up in a neat package:

“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

The ancient Chinese sage Confucius says much the same thing, in this little saying that could fit inside the proverbial fortune cookie: “If you devote your life to seeking revenge, dig two graves.”

Jesus knows this. He knows how true it is that vengeance has two victims: the one who is its target as well as the one who bends the bow.

He wants to save us from that damage. He wants to show us another way: a difficult way, to be sure, but the only way that truly leads to freedom.

There's a story from the Buddhist tradition, retold by the Catholic sage from India, Father Anthony de Mello:

The Buddha was once threatened with death by a bandit called Angulimal.

There was no escape. The outlaw stood there, facing the Buddha with his long and very sharp sword. “Would you be so kind,” the Buddha asked, “as to fulfill my dying wish?”

“What is that?” said the bandit.

“Cut off the branch of that tree over there.”

“Is that all?” said the outlaw. “That is easily done.” And so he stepped over, and — with one swift stroke of his sword, neatly severed the branch from the trunk.

“What now?” asked the bandit, not believing this could be all of the man’s dying wish.

“There is something more,” said the Buddha. “Now, put it back again.”

“You must be mad!” laughed the bandit. “Who could possibly do something like that?”

“On the contrary, it is you who are crazy to imagine you are mighty because you can wound and destroy. That is the task of children. The mighty know how to create and heal.”

Let those who have ears to hear, listen.