

## The readings for Sunday, February 19, 2017:

First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Psalm: Psalm 119:33-40

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23

Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

Turn the other cheek. Give up your coat and your shirt. Walk the second mile. This Sunday we get to texts which have been so misunderstood through the centuries that it's hard to remember what Jesus was really saying. Jesus was NOT saying to let your abuser batter you day in and day out. Jesus was not instructing us to let evil steamroll right over us. Jesus was not even calling us to pacifism, a stoic acceptance of brutality that will buy us a better condo in Heaven for enduring hell on earth.

No, these are resistance texts. Yes, resistance texts.

These are texts that show us how to resist evil in such a way that evil elements will not turn around and destroy us. Likewise, these are texts that show us how to resist evil in such a way that we don't become the evil that we are resisting.

It's important to remember that the culture of Jesus was a vastly different culture. It was a culture based on honor. It was a culture based on social hierarchy. It was also a culture ruled by Romans who were not going to tolerate social unrest, Romans who would not hesitate to slaughter dissenters.

Jesus shows us how to live in this world, how to resist evil without being destroyed by evil. If you want to read the best text on this idea, I recommend Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. It is one of the best books of theology I've ever read, and I've read a lot of theology.

Let's focus on the turning of the other cheek, since this passage is so well known. Notice that Jesus gives specific cheeks in specific order. That's a detail lost on us, but it wouldn't have been lost on the people who heard Jesus' instructions. Walter Wink explains:

"Imagine if I were your assailant and I were to strike a blow with my right fist at your face, which cheek would it land on? It would be the left. It is the wrong cheek in terms of the text we are looking at. Jesus says, 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek...' I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a left hook, but that would be impossible in Semitic society because the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of

power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave or by a husband to a wife or by a parent to a child or a Roman to a Jew in that period. What Jesus is saying is in effect, 'When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, and turn your other cheek.'

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. Furthermore, you can't backhand someone twice. It's like telling a joke a second time. If it doesn't work the first time, it has failed. By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, 'I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed.' This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity."

Wink explains the other elements of the Gospel resistance readings [here](#). It's a great way to introduce yourself to his work, especially for those of us who aren't up to reading his multi-volume works on resisting the various powers at work in this world.

For those of you who would sneer at the idea of resistance working in our evil, evil world, I would say that nonviolent resistance can bring mighty social change.

Walter Wink, writing in 1993, notes, "In 1989 alone, there were thirteen nations that underwent non-violent revolutions. All of them successful except one, China. That year 1.7 billion people were engaged in national non-violent revolutions. That is a third of humanity. If you throw in all of the other non-violent revolutions in all the other nations in this century [the 20th], you get the astonishing figure of 3.34 billion people involved in non-violent revolutions. That is two-thirds of the human race. No one can ever again say that non-violence doesn't work. It has been working like crazy. It is time the Christian churches got involved in this revolution because what is happening in the world is that the world itself is discovering the truth of Jesus' teaching, and here we come in the church, bringing up the rear." And of course, more lately we can point to a variety of revolutions, in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East, some of which have fairly peacefully gotten rid of dictators who had been in power for decades.

Maybe we are not up for the task of resistance, which can be scary and can lead us to unexpected places. At the very least, we can pray. We can pray for those people who are doing the heavy lifting of resistance. We can pray for those who are transforming their societies for good, whether they live in our country or on the other side of the planet. We can pray for the softening of the hearts of the hard ones. We can pray that we have the wisdom to recognize evil when we see it. We can pray that we have the courage to resist evil in whatever forms it comes to us.