

Epiphany 7 Year A,

Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh - Giving up the fight

23rd February, 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 NRSV / Matthew 5:38-48 NRSV

I'd like to start today with a little story

about Scottish novelist and playwright Walter Scott.

Sir Walter Scott had difficulty with the idea of "turning the other cheek."

But Jesus' words took on special meaning one day

when Scott threw a rock at a stray dog to chase it away.

His aim was like a baseball pitcher and he hit the animal and broke its leg.

Instead of running off, the dog limped over to him and licked his hand.

Sir Walter never forgot that touching response.

He said, "That dog preached the Sermon on the Mount to me

as few ministers have ever presented it."

Scott said he had not found human beings so ready to forgive their enemies.

That cute little story neatly sums up the dilemma we have with this scripture, doesn't it?

On the surface, Jesus's admonition to turn the other cheek

seems like a noble ideal that doesn't quite fit into the real world we live in.

It doesn't match our observance of how things really work.

But then, how well has the opposite worked out for us in our lives?

In recorded history?

An eye for an eye sounds fair, after all.

The concept was put forth in Leviticus

to try to moderate revenge and retribution,
to make for an equitable tit for tat,
to keep people from going off the deep end
in seeking revenge and justice.

By the time Jesus came along, this Old Testament rule
was being debated by the Pharisees.

Their thoughts were that the rule applied,
but it would be better to equate a monetary compensation f
or wrongs done to another,
rather than equitable actions of violence and physical retribution.

It's into this debate that Jesus steps
in this set of antitheses from his Sermon on the Mount.

But instead of weighing in
on one side of the debate or the other with the Pharisees,
he takes the discussion in a completely new direction.

Rather than continuing the cycle of violence and revenge
that had defined justice to that point,
he argues that the way of God is a different path altogether.

As we have discovered on our journey through the Sermon on the Mount,
the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus presents
is one that's all about right relationship, about community,
about radical welcome.

There can be no "other" in God's kingdom.

Too often this passage has been interpreted

as advocating a passive response to violence,
to encouraging us to be “doormats” when faced with aggression.

But that's not really what Jesus is saying in our passage from Matthew.

I'd like to do a little demonstration to illustrate this.

But I'll need a volunteer to come here and assist.

It's important to consider the details of Jesus' statement
about turning the other cheek.

He states that “if anybody strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

The first thing we have to recognize is the cultural significance
of the right and left hands.

As is still the case in Palestine and the Near East,
the right hand is the honorable hand.

This is the hand you eat with, extend in friendship, and fight with.

You never used the left hand for any honorable purposes.

It was considered an insult and dishonorable to eat with,
to fight with, and anything else respectable.

Without getting too graphic, it was only fit
for unclean tasks such as certain personal hygiene tasks.

The second point to consider is the manner in which you struck someone.

For someone who was your equal, deserving of your respect,
you always struck from the palm side, never the back of your hand.

Backhands were reserved for those who were of lesser stature than yourself,
and considered demeaning and humiliating.

So in our demonstration, if she is facing me, in order to hit him on the right cheek,
I would have to backhand her.

Which means that I am seeking to humiliate and demean her,
as she is lesser than me in status.

In Jesus' context, that would imply he is a slave,
or from a lower social class than myself.

But if she turns and offers me the other cheek, I cannot backhand the left cheek.

If I want to continue striking her, I have to use the palm of my hand,
which then implies she is worthy of my respect, my equal.

By turning the other cheek in that cultural context,

you forced the aggressor to recognize your humanity and worth,
and the dignity you deserved.

By giving up your cloak as well as your coat,

you were standing naked in front of your accuser,
highlighting the ridiculous situation that person had put you in,
taking your clothes because of a debt or slight owed to them,
and dealing them a fair dose of shame and humiliation in the process.

Jesus is illustrating that the circle of violence can only be broken

by not responding in kind,
but by responding in love by modeling compassion and forgiveness.

It's stepping out of the Kingdom of men and stepping into the Kingdom of God,
which is a realm based on love, not violence.

But in order to begin to rid ourselves of violence, we first must get rid of retribution.

In most altercations, people are responding to some perceived slight by another,

seeking retribution.

Whether verbal or physical, most people who throw the first punch

see that act as responding to some disrespectful act, or verbal insult.

Everyone feels justified in their action

because they can place the blame on another.

In their mind, it's not their fault, they're not the bad guy.

The blame can always be placed elsewhere.

This concept of justified revenge, or retribution,

is what enables us to act out in violence, feeling justified in our behavior.

This problem is not just limited to individual behavior.

Throughout history, as groups,

whether cultural, political, and even religious,

we've justified our violence

as retributive responses to perceived actions against us.

Sadly, the argument could be made that this is a large part

of how we maintain our unity as groups and clans and maintain order.

By establishing a common enemy, we have a cause to unify behind,

and a target for our aggression and hostility.

And often, when that enemy is defeated,

we find a new group for retribution.

Who is it that is different from us?

Who don't we understand, and therefore fear?

History is full of such groups.

Samaritans, Jews, people of color,

different sexual orientations and gender identities,

Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Muslims, Central Americans, the list goes on and on.

Don't get me wrong. We usually find reasons to justify their scapegoating.

Jews were accused of stealing gentile children

and controlling the world economy.

The Irish were stereotyped as drunken Catholic hooligans.

LGBTQ folks were and still are stereotyped as pedophiles and degenerates.

But Jesus is telling us that this is not the will of the Father.

Instead of vilifying and hating our perceived enemies,

we are to love them, and pray for them.

There is no "other" in the kingdom of Heaven.

If God can love us at our worst without condition,

then how can we refuse to love and honor each other?

We're called to be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect.

That doesn't imply that we will achieve a sinless life.

But we are created in God's image.

We were created to be perfect children of the Almighty,

and while we may not achieve absolute piety,

we can live lives imitating the values of God.

That's what Jesus calls us to in this passage.

To turn away from perpetuating the cycle of violence and retribution

that has characterized us since Cain and Abel.

To live lives of love, not hate.

And to love our neighbor, and the Bible makes clear

that our neighbor is everyone,
not just other Christians, not just people like us.

As someone who sometimes has a t-shirt collecting “problem”,

I recently saw one for sale online that really drives this point home.

It says, “It’s my job to love, it’s God’s job to judge.”

Jesus argues that what’s important is how we treat people
who are very different than us,

often the least of these, the outcast among us.

It can be all too easy to try to weasel away from this passage,
by pointing out the violence of the Old Testament.

There are some very nasty episodes there, for sure.

But if you look at the whole canon, from Genesis to Revelation,
there is a steady movement away from revenge and sacred violence
towards love and compassion.

From the first murder of retribution of Abel,
to the laws regulating sacrifice and retributive justice,
to the prophets who stress righteousness over right sacrifice,
to the teachings of God Incarnate in Jesus Christ.

All throughout is the command to love thy neighbor, to care for the “other.”

All along we are told to model ourselves after God, to seek righteousness,
to be holy like our Creator.

It can be too easy to try to justify violence on noble grounds,
as being the lesser of two evils,
of ridding the world of a greater evil,

especially in times of war and conflict.

But unless we start modeling and promoting lives of nonviolence and compassion,
those situations will keep arising.

If the church had stood up as the body of Christ in the 30's and 40's in Europe,
history may have told a different story

than an all-consuming World War and Holocaust.

I'd like to close with a story from World War II about the power

that love and compassion can have,

even in the most desperate of circumstances.

Ernest Gordon was serving as a captain in the British army

during the Second World War when he was captured by the Japanese,

marched with other prisoners into the Southeast Asian jungles, a

nd forced to construct a railroad bridge over the river Kwai.

The conditions of the prison camp would eventually claim the lives of 80,000 men.

The prisoners were made to work for hours in scorching temperatures,

chopping their way through tangled jungles.

Those who paused out of exhaustion were beaten to death by the guards.

Treated like animals, the men themselves became like beasts trying to survive.

Theft and betrayal were as rampant as hunger and disease among them.

Life was met with indifference, deceit,

and hatred--by captive and captor alike.

Yet, Gordon lived to tell of hope and transformation in the valley of the river Kwai.

In his widely acclaimed book, he gives a firsthand account

of the story behind the "death railroad"

and the spiritual resurrection of the camp.

"Death was still with us," writes Gordon.

"But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip.

We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast
between the forces that made for life
and those that made for death.

Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence,
laziness and pride were all anti-life.

Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity and creative faith,
on the other hand, were the essence of life,
turning mere existence into living in its truest sense.

These were the gifts of God to men.

True, there was hatred. But there was also love.

There was death. But there was also life.

God had not left us.

He was with us, calling us to live the divine life in fellowship."

In the valley of the shadow of death, Christ had risen.

God somehow changed those men

so that they found themselves unable to respond to others
without similar unexplainable acts of grace.

In fact, so complete was the transformation of the men,
so real the presence of Christ among them,

that they were able to reach out even to their captors
with the love that had taken hold of them.

While still in the hands of their enemies,

a train carrying Gordon and several others

came alongside another boxcar at a stop in Burma.

The entire car was filled with gravely wounded Japanese soldiers.

They were left alone, without medical attention or company,

as if abandoned refuse of war.

"They were in a shocking state," Gordon recalls.

"The wounded looked at us forlornly

as they sat with their heads resting against the carriages

waiting fatalistically for death....

These were our enemy."

Without a word, many of the officers unbuckled their packs,

took out part of their rations and a few rags,

and with their canteens went over to the Japanese train.

The guards tried to prevent them, but they pressed through,

kneeling by the side of the injured men with food and water,

cleaning their wounds.

Eighteen months earlier the same men of the river Kwai prison camp

would have celebrated the humiliation and destruction

of anyone on the side of their violent captors.

Yet Gordon explains, "We had experienced a moment of grace,

there in the bloodstained railway cars.

God had broken through the barriers of our prejudice

and had given us the will to obey his command, 'Thou shalt love.'"

Ernest Gordon left his three years of brutal imprisonment
with an unexpected turn in his own story.

Among the suffering and enemies, God had spoken.

Now it was Gordon who could not remain silent.

He returned to Scotland to attend seminary,

eventually becoming the dean of the chapel of Princeton University

where he remained until his death in 2002.

In the trenches of despair and hatred,

the inexplicable love of Christ called enemies--and humankind--

to hope and forgiveness.

That is the power of Christ's message of all encompassing love.

We have a choice.

Do we follow God's wisdom, or the wisdom of the world?

Evangelist and teacher Oswald Chambers once confessed,

"If I work for God because I know it brings me the good opinion

of those whose good opinion I wish to have, I am a Pharisee.

If I love Jesus Christ, I will serve humanity,

though men and women treat me like a doormat."

I pray that we all choose the path of grace and compassion

that Jesus calls us to today. Amen.