

Feb. 19, 2017

Matt. 5: 38-48
VII Epiphany

Nevertheless, We Persist (and Resist)

She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless she persisted.

That iconic and cultural statement was birthed just 11 days ago.

As Senator Elizabeth Warren was reading the 1986 letter by Coretta Scott King in the Senate, she was silenced by an obscure and century-old, Rule 19. The excuse for silencing her, has become almost overnight the revolutionary cry for standing up and resisting the wrongs that surround us.

But that which was intended to silence, actually launched a social media storm. What was intended to humiliate and put Senator Warren behind a closed door, actually created a huge platform for her words and message. This trio of sentences are now being used to illustrate historic and cultural examples of women being silenced.. such as suffragettes, Rosa Parks, Malala, and even Princess Leia.

This is what Jesus is talking about ... in this (at first blush), troublesome passage: how we are to stand up and confront the wrong, and the unjust.

This is important stuff here. This is revolutionary stuff. This is the climax of the Sermon on the Mount.

And to understand the Cross.. we have to understand what Jesus is saying here.

To understand how we as a community of Christians are to act in the world, we have to understand what Jesus is saying here.

This is not antiquated pie in the sky by and by. This is **our** challenge, even today, as Jesus followers.

Let me just set the stage for you about how Jesus is being very revolutionary here. This is no Jesus meek and mild. He is talking to people who are on the lowest rungs of society: they are poor; they are in debt; they can barely keep life and limb together, and it's not getting any better for them. Even the laws seem to be against them.

Now our usual human tendency when faced with danger or injustice is **fight or flight**. But Jesus says there is a **third way**.



Jesus reminds the crowd of the **Law of Retaliation**:

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

And then he gives them three examples of non-retaliation:

1. if someone strikes you on the cheek
2. If someone sues you
3. If someone forces you to go a mile.

Jesus is teaching this underclass how to walk through the stacked deck of society not as victims, but as people who find and take up their own dignity and power of choice.

He is showing them how to cleverly force their oppressor into a position where he might be able to really look at his actions.

He's teaching them about actively confronting injustice without violence... all the while displaying a profound love and compassion for those very oppressors.

Why is this concept so hard for us to **get**? Christians have been very adept at negotiating around this teaching with such excuses as this teaching is antiquated, naïve, impractical, self-deprecating, masochistic, inviting bullying and other abuse. But we do Jesus a disservice, to not wrestle with how very revolutionary this teaching is.

Gandhi once was quoted as saying,

"The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as NON-VIOLENT... are Christians."

U.S. Representative and civil rights leader **John Lewis** from Georgia has been in the news, and we have all been reminded of his organizing the March on Washington with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963.

He was one of the first to be beaten unconscious by police. And



that day became infamous as *Bloody Sunday*.

He is the son of share croppers. As a junior in college he attended non-violence workshops in the basement of Clark Memorial Methodist Church in Nashville. He became dedicated to the discipline and philosophy of nonviolence.



**AN EYE
FOR AN
EYE AND
THE WHOLE
WORLD WOULD
BE BLIND**

He remembers that training:

“We did go through the motion, the drama, of saying that if someone kicks you, spits on you, pulls you off the lunch counter stool, continue to make eye contact. Continue to give the impression, ‘Yes, you may beat me, but I’m human.’ Be friendly, try to smile, and just stay nonviolent. And during the nonviolent campaign, in a city like Nashville, and so many other parts of the American South, you never had one incident of someone striking back or hitting back...”

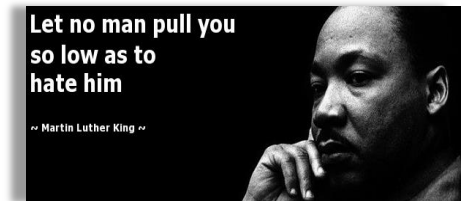
“.... you have to grow. It’s just not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence.... So you try to appeal to the goodness of every human being. And you don’t give up. You never give up on anyone....

“...The movement created what I like to call a nonviolent revolution. It was love at its best. It’s one of the highest forms of love: That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I’m going to still love you”.

And so Jesus says:

If someone strikes you .. turn the other cheek.

That certainly sounds like being a doormat. But not so in that first century culture. If you hit someone with your right hand.. it is on their left cheek. If they turn their opposite cheek it is now a physical impossibility to strike them because: the angle is now wrong, you cannot use your left hand, nor the back of your right hand.



As the perpetrator, what might go through your mind as you think about the impossibility of it, as well as the sight of the injured person in front of you as he voluntarily turned his face to you, daring you to strike him again? The injured party now has taken charge of his situation, without submitting to you.

And note that Jesus is not forbidding self-defense here; only the use of violence.

Since last April, the people of Standing Rock Indian Reservation have been persisting against the Dakota Access Pipe Line. They believe the pipeline, which goes from North Dakota to Illinois, will jeopardize the Missouri River, which is the water source of the reservation (and countless other non-reservation peoples). A picture of the camp today shows it clean, with no garbage, no cigarette butts, no plastic cups. It is sacred ground.



They have peacefully protested and prayed and

talked.

They have shaken the hands of troopers,
and invited them into their prayer circle.

Since August, over 700 have been arrested.

4,000 veterans are now standing guard.

February 22 is the date

the Army Corps will close the lands.

***If someone sues you for your coat,
give them your underwear as well.***

Why would you do that?

First of all, Jesus is talking to the very poor. Most peasants were deep in debt from selling off their family land just to keep feeding their family. A coat could be taken as collateral for the debt, but had to be returned at night (as most were used also as the only night covering).



But there is also the law to not to expose another person's nakedness. *The shame* would *not* be on the naked person, but the one who *caused* the nakedness. So if in court, you are told to give up your coat, Jesus tells them with a twinkle in his eye, *give them your underwear as well...* because that will bring shame upon them and hopefully shock them into realizing what they are doing.



In 1903, **Clarence Jordan** was born in Georgia. He'd go on to get his agriculture degree, be ordained by the southern Baptists, and earn his PhD in biblical Greek. Clarence took Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to heart, and became a conscientious objector.

In 1942, Clarence and a friend developed the idea of a Christian community farm (after the concept in the book of Acts), called ***Koinonia Farm***, where everyone worked equally, and everything was held in common by both black and white members. Here they would eat and work together, share their property, their work, and their lives.

It may have been biblical, but it was not the culture of the South. By the 1950s, Koinonia Farm had drive-by shootings, bombings and other attacks. According to one story, the Klan bombed Koinonia's little roadside nut stand. Full of optimism, the group rebuilt their stand, only to have it blown up once again. Well they got the message and began selling nuts by mail order with the slogan:

"Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia!"

If someone asks you to go one mile, go the second mile.

Well that's a nice phrase in English: go the second mile.. it means you are willing to go above and beyond. But that's **not** what is happening here.

The Roman law, was that a soldier could ask anyone to carry their gear for up to one mile (think of Simon who had to carry Jesus' cross). But **only** a mile. After that there were stiff penalties if the soldier made you continue.



So imagine you are a soldier with more gear than you can carry. You pick out someone from the crowd to carry your burden. He doesn't put up any argument or try to get out of it. Off you go down the road, and before you know it, you have traveled two miles. Now YOU (the soldier), are the one in trouble, and he (your beast of burden), has in fact tricked you into breaking the law. What will happen now? Will he register a complaint? Create trouble for you? He, in fact, went from being a victim, to setting his own terms. He took back *his* choice.

Jesus is **not** telling these peasants to accept their lot in life so they will have a better place in heaven. He is teaching a worldly-wise, gritty spirituality where those on the bottom rung of heap learn about **self**-determination in an unjust system.



How can you confront evil...
and not mirror that evil?

How can you fight fire ..
not with fire, but with water?

How can you neutralize your enemy
without either of you being destroyed?

How do we **not** become the thing we hate?

So rather than *fight or flight*, Jesus advocates that **THIRD WAY**. From this Matthew passage, and knowing what we do about that culture and history, and the brilliance of Jesus' tactics, we can take these points (by Walter Wink), and apply them to our own lives and situations. As you read through this list, think about Jesus, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, the Standing Rock Water Protectors.

Jesus Third Way by Walter Wink

1. Seize the moral initiative
2. Find a creative alternative to violence
3. Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person
4. Meet force with ridicule or humor
5. Break the cycle of humiliation
6. Refuse to submit or to accept the inferior position
7. Expose the injustice of the system
8. Take control of the power dynamic
9. Shame the oppressor into repentance
10. Stand your ground
11. Make the Powers make decisions for which they are not prepared
12. Recognize your own power
13. Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate
14. Force the oppressor to see you in a new light
15. Deprive the oppressor of a situation
where a show of force is effective
16. Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws
17. Die to fear of the old order and its rules
18. Seek the oppressor's transformation

And all of these are under the Jesus' command to LOVE...
love your enemy
and pray for those who persecute you.

All of these ways of RESISTING injustice have to come from the place
of wanting the best for your oppressor.

It's like an **oxymoron**: the ***beloved enemy***.

And Jesus lives this out to, and through his death:

He knew he would be betrayed, but he let it play out at his last supper.

In the garden when Peter cut off the soldier's ear, Jesus healed it.

In his audience with Pilate he verbally spared with him, and then refused to answer his questions.

On the cross he prayed for his persecutors.

This faith,
that Jesus lifts up here
in the Sermon on the Mount..
is not some *opiate of the people*...

It is brave and daring and gutsy.

This is a leader I can follow..

This is a movement going forward
for the *good* of all of God's creation.

This is a church community
where together we can learn to do this.

We persist!

Amen.



Preached by the Rev. Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.