

“The Disarming Power of Love”  
Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Matthew 5:38-48 and Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

As we receive Jesus’ guidance from the Sermon on the Mount today, let me be the first to tell you that I approach Jesus’ advice with some hesitation. I value relationships of mutuality and of equality-- whether in friendship, marriage, or in the community-- so to accept a use of violence, especially in relationships of power, makes me question Jesus. We live under the gaze of the residents of Oelhaf House-- women and children who come from relations of abuse so extreme that they have had to flee their homes to protect their lives. It does not honor God to submit to violence. To tell survivors of abuse that they should turn the other cheek so that their abuser can continue harming them seems incompatible with recognizing them as bearers of the image of God.

Indeed, Jesus’ command does not make much sense in today’s world. To do good, bless, and pray for those who hate, curse and persecute you seems more like an act of self-humiliation rather than reconciliation. Jesus follows this maxim with a concrete example: “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” On the surface this action, or more correctly, lack of action, shows signs of weakness at best, and an invitation to allow a continuance of damaging, abusive behavior at worst.

However, in analyzing this text we must remember that as Christians we are given a certain set of tools, a different set of rules from the culture around us, with which to navigate our relationships with our neighbor, with our enemy, with our community and with God. These rules, when used

creatively, help us to channel the power and love of God in all our interactions.

The rules of the Roman culture in which Jesus lived were the *lex talionis*-- the Law of Equal Retribution, which also exists in the Torah, called for an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth." Mahatmas Gandhi, who was a big fan of Jesus' teachings but lamented that Christians have such a hard time following them, once famously said "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

But in a conversation I had with Rabbi Barry Schwartz last week, he stood up for the Law of Equal Retribution in a way that I had not considered. The Rabbi's Jewish interpretation of the law means that ***a person's punishment should never be bigger than the crime itself.*** So for example, if I poke my enemy's eye out, I would not be stoned to death, but instead I would be responsible for the restitution, or lost income, of my enemy due to the loss of his or her eye. So in today's world, if a person commits a crime, the punishment should ***only*** be based on the crime, not based on the crime *plus* time in jail waiting for a hearing. The punishment should be based on the original crime-- not on a person's legal immigration status. The Hebrew Bible is very clear that there should be one law, with the same rights and punishments for resident and alien alike-- and as we can see from our Leviticus reading today, the Torah made special provisions to provide for society's most vulnerable, such as not harvesting your vineyard or field until it is bare, so that the poor and alien may glean from it and eat. Here in Leviticus we hear for the first time the Golden Rule: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If we can follow these rules at a minimum, we'd do alright.

However, we don't. Even as we cannot seem to accomplish this minimum of loving our neighbor as ourselves-- heck, some of us even have a hard time simply loving ourselves-- Jesus adds an extra challenge: "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

Christians do not have access to such tools as curses. African American poet Audre Lorde said “You cannot use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.” This saying means that we cannot use the ways of our enemies to find the ways of justice and peace. No, again I tell you we Christians have a different set of rules. Our tools are love, blessings, and prayer. And in fact these tools do not necessarily lead into a passive submission to injustice. Rather, love, blessings and prayer can lead to a radical turning of tables.

A turning of the tables does require a certain level of commitment. The love Jesus invokes in the Sermon on the Mount comes from the Greek form, *agape*, that means an unconditional, transcendent love. Friendship, we all know, involves a kind of commitment between people. Even when my friend wrongs me, I am not going to throw our relationship out the window if our relationship is worth anything. Instead, I am going to try to get my friend to understand and be accountable for the pain the wrong has caused me. We hope that God would provide the same consideration for us, and in fact through Jesus God shows us that God does allow us that grace. We are *worth* that much to God.

One commentator notes that turning the other cheek “proposes taking the initiative to turn the conventional act of humiliation into an act of provocation that calls into question the entire posture of the assailant.” We spoke last week about the non-violent activism of the civil rights movement that exposed the damage racist laws cause humanity, no matter how white, brown or black one’s skin is: when one group is wronged, the relationship of the whole country, the whole of humanity, is thrown off.

Jesus goes on to say, “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Theologian and activist Walter Wink compared Matthew’s version of this saying from the Sermon on the Mount with Luke’s version from the Sermon on the Plain. Matthew’s Jesus advises that in

addition to giving your coat, you give your cloak; whereas Luke's Jesus says that in addition to giving your coat, give your shirt too. The Greek word used here in Luke-- *himation*-- means an outer garment or cloak of wool, whereas the Greek word used in Matthew-- *chiton*-- is the undergarment worn next to the skin. So in Matthew, Jesus is telling us that if someone sues you for your coat, then give your undergarments as well!

Now, do not worry if you put on your ratty underwear instead of your bright and clean ones; before you go slipping out of your boxers and panties to mail them to the credit card company or your mortgage lender, I want you to notice what Matthew's Jesus is implying. By telling a poor debtor to remove their undergarments in front of their loan sharks, the one in debt engages in a stunning protest against the system that created his or her debt. According to Walter Wink, in first century Palestine, to expose yourself, naked, brings shame more on to the person who witnesses the nakedness than on the actual naked person.

What Jesus is asking is that in exposing our cheek, or our very bodies, we expose to an enemy or oppressor for his or her act of injustice. The burden of injustice is then put back onto the one who caused it, and it becomes *their* responsibility to make it right.

Human relationships are like the model we used in the children's sermon that demonstrates Newton's law of physics. When the ball on one side rises and falls, hitting the rest of the balls, the ball on the other end follows through with an equal and identical reaction. If we oppose curses with curses, we can only expect an equal and opposite reaction in return. The measure you give will be the measure you get back. Rather than entering an endless cycle of negativity and violence, a blessing can interrupt and create a new and different momentum. The U2 lead musician Bono once said "Love interrupts the consequences of your actions."

Jesus' command to pray for those who persecute you brings God into the equation. God knows the righteous, and God sees wrongs that have been done. By praying for the enemy, the victim brings the enemy into the framework of God's will. Like the covenant God has shown to God's people, praying for the enemy places the enemy into covenant relationship with the person wronged.

But there is something more. I think that Jesus understood that the things we despise in others, the things that make them our enemies, are things that also exist at some level within ourselves. By facing our enemies, we must also face that within ourselves that we most hate and struggle with. If we can find a way with Jesus to free ourselves from the enemy within, we may also have a chance of transforming the relationships we have with our enemies on the outside. I believe prayer can help us do that.

Here is a challenging truth: God's love is just as abundant for my enemies as it is for me. When I do violence toward my enemies, then I am doing violence upon God's beloved. We need to bring God into the equation, so that God gives us a new and different momentum that can change power relationships, change our enemies, and change us so that instead of being victims, we can be victorious. Instead of being doormats, we can open doors. Instead of being brokers of hate, we can be brokers of peace. Instead of relinquishing our power, we can empower responsibility.

God who gifted us with Jesus, help us find this power. Amen.