

“Love in Action”

Matthew 5:38-48
First Presbyterian Church
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Rev. Clinton G. Roberts

Every father wants his daughter or son to do well in school, right? To make friends, get good grades and stay out of trouble? So imagine my dismay when the secretary at Solon Robinson Elementary School called me at work to inform me that there had been an incident on the playground involving my ten-year-old son Evan, and that he was now being held outside the Principal’s Office in detention, awaiting a parent to come in and get him. I was also informed that the principal would like to “have a word” with me...

As I walked down the long, linoleum corridor recollecting my own juvenile misadventures, I saw my son sitting on the bench outside the Principal’s Office just as he saw me. “I didn’t do anything, Dad!” he shouted, jumping to his feet. “Brian sat on me!” Brian was one of Evan’s little friends, although in fact he was anything but little. He was big, and he was heavy, weighing in at over twice the poundage of my scrawny son.

I learned quickly that Brian had elected to “sit” on Evan during recess, for which indignity Evan had punched him in the nose, drawing blood. Hence the detention.

The principal’s door opened and I was ushered inside, without Evan. The door closed, and the two professional men, one secular, the other religious, eyed one another in silence until they both began to chuckle. “You know I had to discipline him,” said the principal. “He threw the first punch.” “I know,” responded the preacher, “but I’m still proud he defended himself. After all, if that big kid were sitting on you, what would you do?” The principal grunted non-committally, and at that moment, I remembered the words of Jesus, our text for today. This sermon will serve, in part, as my atonement for teaching my son to practice “an eye for an eye.”

I

Not that the concept itself is wrong, mind you. It is enshrined in the Old Testament, where God’s covenant laws are intended to preserve justice and equity, making the punishment fit the crime. If you pluck out another’s eyeball, you will pay for your actions by losing one of your own.

This is good stuff. It is, and it should be, the basis for any code of law practiced in civilized society. People deserve fair and equitable redress for the wrongs committed on them. We call this retributive justice, and as a society, we ignore this at our peril, as we have seen in this nation’s history. But the ancient world (as does areas of our own) didn’t work that way.

Political power, rather than being exercised through law, could be imposed brutally and asymmetrically, like the Nazi occupation of Holland in World War Two, where the killing of one German soldier by the Resistance would result in the execution of ten civilians at random the following day.

“An eye for an eye” is far better than tyranny, but when retribution turns into retaliation and even worse—revenge—society has a big problem. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation.” That’s what a lot of us think our current practice of politics is leading us toward today.

But then comes this extraordinary teaching of Jesus, which changes everything.

II

At the heart of his sermon, Jesus addresses the laws of God by saying six times, “You have heard that it was said “followed by “But I say to you.” These are known as the Six Commands, three of which address the inward condition of our hearts, and the following three the outward actions we take. Specifically, they address our practice of the plain truth in speech, our rejection of “getting even,” and our willingness to put God’s love into action.

We should remember that Jesus was preaching to the Jewish people, people who lived under the brutal occupation of Rome, who ruled their conquests with “blood and iron,” as Friedrich Nietzsche advised Germany to do. Roman soldiers practiced violence on the people, taxing them unmercifully, striking them, and compelling them to carry their gear long distances. King Herod the Less and the Sadducees collaborated with the Romans, enriching themselves in the process, but the Zealots and the Maccabees embraced violent resistance. One of these, a man named Simon, was actually a disciple of Jesus. Many in Galilee looked on Jesus as the “Son of David,” the Lord’s Anointed, who would restore the kingdom of Israel through a popular uprising against Rome and the Herodians. Judas Maccabeus had done this successfully against the Seleucid Empire. Would Jesus of Nazareth do it again?

But the Son of Man, as Jesus described himself, had come to establish a different kind of kingdom: in the world but not of it—the kingdom of heaven here on earth. “You have heard that it was said, ‘And eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, “Do not ever try to get even with an evildoer” (to use a translation of Dale Brunner’s). “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, present the other also...” Now that’s a tough teaching, isn’t it? How would an incarcerated person respond to this, or a police officer, or a battered spouse? Is Jesus really telling us to submit to violence, no matter what? I remember getting punched in the face by the quarterback at Binghamton Central High School during the Homecoming Dance, but that was because we lost the game that night and I, a lowly Sophomore, was dancing with the prettiest Senior in school, who drove me around in her Corvette.

He walked up to me on the dance floor and said, “Are you looking at me?” and then he clocked me... I didn’t exactly turn the other cheek...but we all know some very famous people who did.

III

At the close of the Second World War, India and Palestine were the first British colonies to seek independence. There was violence in Palestine, but in India, Mahatma Gandhi led a movement of non-violent protest that reflected these teachings of Jesus, even though Gandhi himself was a Hindu.

At first, his organized protests met with great violence, but in time, the British military itself defended Gandhi’s non-violent campaign for freedom and religious tolerance. India won her independence in 1947.

Here in America, Ralph Abernathy of the NAACP, John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr. (who visited Gandhi in India) used the same means to lead a movement of Black liberation. It also was met with violence. Yet for the most part, the movement maintained its discipline of nonviolence, resulting in national legislative reforms like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voter Rights Act of 1965 and the Immigration Act of 1968. Gandhi and King both died by assassination, exactly twenty years apart. Their legacy lives on...

Let us be clear: Jesus’ teaching on turning the other cheek, walking the second mile and giving the shirt off your back is not a teaching of submission. Far from it. He is calling his disciples not to practice retaliation, but to overcome evil with good. If we seek to return evil for evil, what good is accomplished? King said, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” What kind of love? Love in action.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for them,” and all-too-often, we think he meant “like your enemies.” He didn’t say that, because he wasn’t speaking about how we feel. He was addressing what we should do. Skye Jethani in his book “What If Jesus Was Serious?” writes,

“The sort of love Christ calls us to engages far more than our emotions—it activates our will...To love is to act in a manner that is in the best interests of another, even if he does not agree, which may explain why he is our enemy in the first place...Jesus insists that the citizens of His kingdom put the interests of others ahead of their own, even when that other person is our enemy.”

The kind of love that can accomplish this is not naïve or sentimental. It is love in action—and it rests on the agape love of Christ himself, who poured out his life for others, making peace through the blood of his cross.

“But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Do not return evil for evil, but stand your ground and do not retreat from engaging it. This is “the third way” that Walter Wink describes in his book, “Beyond Just War and Pacifism,” a rejection of both fight and flight that the Kumeyaay Nation, whose ancestral lands span both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, beautifully illustrated this month. When they were peacefully protesting in front of the Border Wall, they were assaulted by an enraged Anglo woman who, striking them repeatedly and mouthing obscenities, told them that this was her country and to get the hell out. But the handful of Kumeyaay people refused to retaliate, restraining her punches and speaking to her calmly and steadily. And then they began to sing: a chant of healing, which she mocked. They did not retaliate—but they also stood their ground. It was a remarkable illustration of Jesus’ teaching.

Conclusion

What has become quite clear to me over the years is that whatever the issues which confront us as a nation (and there are many), if we are to embrace these commands of Jesus, we must start with the people we know and we live with. Because Jesus is calling us to far more than non-retaliation. He is calling us to love one another through positive acts and clear priorities which build up the people around us in body, mind and spirit. Yes—this love may include expressions of deep sentiment—but its goal is much more than emotion: it’s about treating others—all others—the way we need to be treated ourselves.

So when it comes to turning the other cheek, remember the words of French philosopher Simone Weil: “Don’t just do something,” she said. “Stand there!” As it’s written in Proverbs 16:32: “Those who rule their spirits are mightier than those who rule a city.”

When we move beyond the ethics of retribution to go the second mile, to give to any who ask for our help, and to prayerfully seek the welfare of even those who are at enmity with us, we become the very people Jesus was referring to when he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

God’s own family. I like the sound of that. We’ll certainly take some blows putting God’s love into action, but it’s worth it in the end. Because in this case—the means will justify the ends, when that end is the Beloved Community, God’s gift of shalom.