

The Second Mile (Love Your Enemies)

Rev. Stephen A. Landale
The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene
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FIRST READING

Matthew 5:38-41, 43-44
(Revised Standard Version)

You have heard that it was said,
 "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."
But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil.
But if any one strikes you on the right cheek,
 turn to him the other also;
and if any would sue you and take your coat,
 let him have your cloak as well;
and if any one forces you to go one mile,
 go with him two miles...

You have heard that it was said,
 "You shall love your neighbor
 and hate your enemy."
But I say to you,
 Love your enemies
 and pray for those who persecute you."

SECOND READING

from the Preface to the Vietnamese Edition of *No Man is an Island*
by Thomas Merton

Violence rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are entirely different: the enemy is evil and I am good. The enemy must be destroyed but I must be saved. But love sees things differently. It sees that even the enemy suffers from the same sorrows and limitations that I do. That we both have the same hopes, the same needs, the same aspiration for a peaceful and harmless human life. And that death is the same for both of us. Then love may perhaps show me that my brother is not really my enemy and that war is both his enemy and mine. War is *our* enemy. Then peace becomes possible.

It is true, political problems are not solved by love and mercy. But the world of politics is not the only world, and unless political decisions rest on a foundation of something better and higher than politics, they can never do any real good for men. When a country has to be rebuilt after war, the passions and energies of war are no longer enough. There must be a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, and the creative dynamism of *the will to live and to build, and the will to forgive. The will for reconciliation.*

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“Gentle Words” – what a lovely piece. (Chorale piece preceding the sermon). It is such a good feeling to step into the pulpit knowing that many of you have already received your sermon for the week, in our music, in listening or in singing. Anything I have to add is icing on the cake.

As most of you know, this church year we have a special focus, a congregational curriculum, of the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism, to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As some of you know, this special focus has a primary sub-theme, and that is Nonviolence. I see Nonviolence as one of the best tools for respecting the worth and dignity of oneself while respecting the worth and dignity of others, including one’s oppressors or perceived enemies. We reflected on nonviolence in our water communion service and will turn to Gandhian nonviolence in February.

Today we turn to Christianity and specifically to Jesus, who said, “Love your enemies!”

What in the world did Jesus mean by this? “Love your enemies!” What, send your least favorite politician a love letter? Walk up to your most difficult relative or classmate or work associate, say you forgive them for everything they’ve done to you, and give them a hug and a hand-crafted gift certificate for a foot massage, from you?

“Love your enemies!”

Jesus, what in the world were you saying?

Before we explore these teachings, let us first address some of the filters in our ears with regards to Jesus. Most of us know of Jesus only or primarily through the filters of family, religion, and culture. Images of Jesus are many and have changed dramatically through time.

For many years now, scholars in a group called The Jesus Seminar have engaged in a search for the authentic words of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. While nobody can claim factual certainty in such a quest, the Jesus Seminar, in my opinion, has used, for the most part, reasonable methods in separating the wheat from the chaff, in sorting Jesus’ words from those placed on his lips by gospel writers or editors.

Since the gospels were written over forty to seventy years after Jesus’ death, the scholars favor those quotations that were easy to memorize -- that is, short and catchy aphorisms and parables, often playing on well-known sayings. They also favor sayings that appear in multiple sources and particularly those that run against the grain of the gospel writer’s agenda.

I don’t want this to turn into a lecture on biblical studies, and I’d be glad to organize a gathering to discuss the Jesus Seminar if enough people are interested. For now, what I would like you to hear is this: when the scholars used these and other methods to determine the words that the historical Jesus most likely said himself, they found a collection of

parables and aphorisms that, when studied together as a group, speak from a distinct and compelling voice. The Jesus Seminar compares this voice to that of a Zen master's, offering clever, challenging, exaggerated, and often humorous sayings designed to shock one out of "common sense" and see something with fresh eyes.

I find this voice to resemble that of some rabbis I've known: clever, challenging, prone to exaggeration, earthy, and humorous. And why not, since Jesus was after all a Jewish rabbi. Christianity did not exist until after his death.

So, perhaps you believe this, perhaps you don't – if this is the first time you've heard about the Jesus Seminar I hope you are keeping an open mind. For now I invite you to try out this perspective on Jesus. Set aside for a moment your previous images of Jesus – spiritual friend or Son of God or Christ the conqueror or redeemer or whatever they might be – and imagine a smiling, loving troublemaker. Imagine a Zen master or a bright-eyed rabbi who loves to turn things on their head. Imagine somebody who wants to shake us out of our habits and see the world and particularly one another with fresh, open eyes.

Now imagine this person saying,

*You have heard that it was said,
"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."
But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil.
But if any one strikes you on the right cheek,
turn to him the other also;
and if any would sue you and take your coat,
let him have your cloak as well;
and if any one forces you to go one mile,
go with him two miles...*

We tend to hear words like these as moral commands from a god-like figure if not from simply God. We tend to hear the King James version "Thou shalt not resist evil." But perhaps it should sound more like this, "Don't fight back – it makes things worse. I know an eye for an eye is the law, but is the law making things better? Don't get caught up in the cycle of violence. And since this is so hard, why don't you get started by doing the complete opposite of what you tend to do."

This is the tone I believe we can best hear the famous line,

*But if any one strikes you on the right cheek,
turn to him the other also;*

Jesus was not saying we should accept and even seek out abuse, as this line has often been interpreted. Jesus was trying to shake people out of their knee-jerk reactions of fight or flight. He is reminding us that we have other choices.

And he does so with abrupt, surprising, graphic language. It's not clear if he means we should literally turn the cheek every time; I doubt it. But to people who want to fight back or run away, then and now, he makes a point: try something new.

And this something new that Jesus suggests has wonderful possibilities. If one were to turn the other cheek when the person who struck you expected you to either cower or fight

back, he might be shocked himself. It seems to me that Jesus is saying: Do something they don't expect.

There is also a subtle, more specific meaning in this phrase. Note that Jesus says, "If any one strikes you on the *right* cheek, turn to him the other also." I learned in seminary that in Jesus' setting, there was a difference between being struck on the right versus the left cheek. Now I'll demonstrate this for you, but I need an assistant. Is there anyone here who would like to take a gentle swing at your minister? Ah, good...

Presuming the assailant to be right-handed, being struck on the right cheek suggests a back-handed slap. Some scholars have argued that a back-handed slap like this was a socially acceptable way of disciplining a subordinate, even in public. Being struck on the right cheek, then, most likely implied not being assaulted in the eyes of onlookers, but a slave being disciplined by a master.

So, think about Jesus' advice in this context. He is saying, "When your master or someone who thinks he is your master slaps you to put you in your place, turn your head so that he can't do it again – force him to choose between outright assaulting you and doing nothing. Tell him and everyone around that you consider his socially-acceptable corporal punishment to be the equivalent of an assault."

Jesus is saying, don't fall into any of the standard roles in the drama of violence. Don't be the victim, the avenger, the champion, the perpetrator, the collaborator, or the bystander. Disrupt the cycle of violence with something so unexpected it's almost comical. Introduce a new role for which the other has no label. Surprise him. Look him in the eye. Get him to see you not as a victim or object but as a human being, an individual who has just made a choice. Invite him to become not a perpetrator but a free person who can respond to your choice.

Jesus continues,

*and if any would sue you and take your coat,
let him have your cloak as well;*

Again, Jesus advises a surprise tactic. A merchant walks up to a peasant debtor in a first century Palestinian marketplace, saying "Pay up or I'll take your coat!" The peasant responds not by begging for more time, or running away, but by handing over his coat *and* his cloak; in the Gospel of Luke version, it's his shirt.

What would be the effect of a peasant debtor stripping down and handing over his clothes to a merchant bullying him for repayment of debts he can't possibly afford? Perhaps people would stop and notice, laughing, even chiding the merchant.

In these few lines is the essence of nonviolent resistance. Turning the other cheek is a tactic that aims to strike the conscience of the perpetrator. Done with the right attitude at the right time, it makes it difficult for the perpetrator to see you as an object, as a victim. You become a subject, a human being. Turning the *right* cheek, in a culture that allows limited physical assaults as a legitimate means of oppression, is challenging the system as well.

With the right attitude and timing, handing over more than is unfairly or unmercifully demanded of you may also help the other to see you as a person, to see the indecency of their demand, and... it may help embrace the other person into withdrawing their demand.

Perhaps you can see how the American Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration from Jesus as well as Gandhi. Sit-ins and marches served to help the perpetrators see the victims as human beings. More effectively, these nonviolent actions, with the help of the media, helped shame the perpetrators in front of the country. This public shaming in turn led government leaders to reform oppressive laws and practices.

Now, the last of these three statements of Jesus adds a new dimension:

*and if any one forces you to go one mile,
go with him two miles...*

Jesus is referring to the practice of Roman soldiers conscripting Jews and other Palestinians to carry their gear. Roman law allowed occupying soldiers to demand this of an individual for one mile. Then, I presume, they asked someone else.

This is one of my favorite passages in the gospels. Jesus suggests another outlandish and counter-intuitive surprise tactic designed to jolt both parties out of their roles and into a fresh encounter as human beings.

Imagine this scenario: an occupying Roman soldier demands that a Jewish person on the street carry his gear for a mile, as the law allows. At the end of the mile, the soldier says, "OK, scram," and looks for someone else. But then the Jew says, "That's OK, sir, I'd be glad to carry your gear another mile."

Imagine the soldier's surprise. As with turning the other cheek and handing over more clothes than was demanded, this offer would catch the other person off guard and invite a non-scripted encounter between human beings. But this third example of loving your enemies differs from the other two: it is not designed to stop the behavior, at least not immediately. The best immediate outcome of turning the other cheek is the other person lowering his fists. The best outcome of offering additional clothes to someone who demands your coat is their being shamed into withdrawing the demand.

But here, the best outcome is not the soldier withdrawing the command, for that has already been followed. The best outcome is the soldier and Jew walking together for an extra mile.

And what would happen on that walk, during that second mile?

The soldier might very well look for the first time into the eyes of a Jew, as a person. Accustomed to conscripts who cower or resist, he has met something different. And he has time to think about it.

"Who is this person?" he might wonder. He might ask, "Why are you doing this?" or, more cautiously, "Are you traveling this direction?" These questions are openings. And this is what Jesus was after – openings through the walls that separate us, Gentile from Jew, clean from unclean, condemned adulterer from would-be stone-thrower. Even if this second mile passed in silence, the soldier would have experienced the Jew as a human being, as an individual.

Yet the soldier will not be the only one learning. The conscript may get to know the soldier – see *him* as human. Perhaps he or she would ask of the soldier, "Where are you

from?” The soldier probably is far from his home, sent against his wishes to a faraway land. The conscript may see that this occupation is not fun and games for the soldier, either. Each may see that the other ultimately wants similar things out of life. Each may see, as the Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, that people are not the enemy, but war.

I imagine this sounds idealistic, and I suppose it is. But several years ago in a newsletter column I wrote that the only hope I could see for peace between Israel and Palestine would be for relatives of victims from both sides to get together. A few months later, at a peace conference held by the American Friends Service Committee (*No More Violence, Anywhere*, April 2002, Providence College, Providence, RI), I learned that such a group in fact existed and was growing. Palestinians and Israelis, walking the second mile together. I pray that others will join them and lay down their weapons.

I wonder what it would be like if young black men and police officers got together to talk about racial profiling, and actually listened to one another: the young men talking about what it's like to be pulled over or to be falsely accused in other ways, and the police officers talking about the dangers of their job and the need to make split-second decisions. I wonder what sort of surprise tactic would invite such a dialogue.

And in our families, what would it be like to walk the second mile? Families have their own profiling systems and role assignments: the boss, the caretaker, the troublemaker, the black sheep, the invisible one, the mediator, the flake, the chosen one, the baby, and so on.

What would it take to step out of your assigned role in your family? Or in your workplace or school? Or at your church or with your friends? Try something surprising, yet gentle. Turn the other cheek. Give more than what is demanded of you, if that would be a change. Set up a situation wherein you and the other might see each other as individuals, free of the roles. When you feel yourself stiffening, when you see the other as a threat, then stop and try something different.

“Resist not evil,” Jesus said. Stop fighting. Breathe. Let go. Do something out of character. Step out of your role. In so doing you will invite others to step out of their assigned roles.

“Love your enemies,” he said. Step back. See them as human.

Walk the second mile, he said. Find a way to share the same space without being enemies. Allow silence to heal you. When the time is right, ask a question. Surprise them with your humanness. And perhaps you'll be surprised by their humanness as well.

Amen.

PRAYER

Spirit of Life,
Voice of Truth in our hearts and minds,
Presence of Love in our midst,
Ennobling Mystery of life in which we move each day and night,
We turn to you now.

We are grateful for all those helpers of humankind,

great and small,
who call us to deeper presence with ourselves and one another.

May we honor the Truth, Love, and Mystery
of our lives
by welcoming each moment as scripture written afresh
-- God's poetry made flesh in the human-to-human meetings
beyond all categories, freed of histories and expectations,
encounters of mutual discovery and empowerment.

May we welcome such moments with the open-hearted joy of a child,
and know that we are experiencing the Reign of Love.

Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

“O Young and Fearless Prophet”, #276 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

BENEDICTION

May we have the wisdom and the courage to walk the second mile,
turn the other cheek, and love our enemies.

And may we know always, we are not alone. We are in community with those living and dead, for thousands of years, who have dared to insist that each human being must be honored as a sacred child of Creation.

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