

A SERMON PREACHED ON FEBRUARY 24, 2019,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The Irish pastor and preacher Tony Nestor tells a true tale about turning the other cheek. Have you heard the one about the winning Irish boxer who got converted and became an evangelist? He was setting up his revival tent when some young hoodlums came by and began heckling him. They got in his face. They insulted him. He ignored them. That only made them bolder and one of them hit him with a hard blow to the face. This boxer-evangelist shrugged it off and kept on with his tent. Then another blow came to the other side of this face. The preacher counted up the blows, one on each cheek, took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, tightened his fists, said, "The Lord gave me no further instructions" and began pummeling their faces.ⁱ Perhaps not how one imagines it, but here we have the gospel lived out to its full intentions!

Believe it or not this is a continuation of last week's gospel message where we learn Luke's version of The Beatitudes with its blessings and woes. It demonstrates to us just how quotable Luke is and how much we've retained of his message that we recognize so much of it so readily. In this pericope it's hard to know where to begin. So much good fodder, such as an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' {39} But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; {40} and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; {41} and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. {42} Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." It sounds like a group of sayings from *The Gospel of Thomas*. Where to jump in?

Since we're doing body parts it'd be prudent to give some time to the cheek, much spoken about and often maligned. "Turn the other cheek" is one of the more well known sayings of Jesus, but also one of the most frequently misunderstood. Does Jesus want us to act like cowards when people strike out against us? Are we to take abuse lying down? Are we to let those who have wronged us go free so that they can harm others. Are we supposed to disarm our police and uniformly disarm our military even though there are innocent people who deserve our protection? These are strange words indeed? What does Jesus mean when he tells us to turn the other cheek and what is the origin of such a seemingly pacific thought process?

For one thing, to "turn the other cheek" does not imply pacifism, nor does it mean we place ourselves or others in mortal danger. Like the principle of the eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth in *Matthew*, turning the other cheek refers to personal retaliation, not criminal offenses or acts of military aggression. Clearly, Jesus did not mean to negate all God's laws and injunctions protecting us against violent crime or invading armies. Rather, Jesus is speaking here of the principle of non-retaliation to affronts against our own dignity, as well as lawsuits to

gain one's personal assets (v. 40), infringements on one's liberty (v. 41), and violations of property rights (v. 42). He was calling for a full surrender of all personal rights.

Biblical scholars tell us that turning the other cheek means "not to return insult for insult in retaliation, which is what most people expect and how worldly people act. Instead, responding to hatred with love just might grab someone's attention and afford us a chance to share the gospel. When we respond in a manner that is unnatural, it displays the supernatural power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. (REPEAT) Jesus was the perfect example because He was silent before His accusers and did not call down revenge from heaven on those who crucified Him."ⁱⁱ

There is a lot written about this verse in biblical and non-theological circles as well, especially regarding its origin. The theologian and scholar Walter Wink, in his book *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, interprets the passage as ways to subvert the power structures of the time.

At the time of Jesus, says Wink, striking backhand a person deemed to be of lower socioeconomic class was a means of asserting authority and dominance. If the persecuted person "turned the other cheek," the discipliner was faced with a dilemma: The left hand was used for unclean purposes, so a back-hand strike on the opposite cheek would not be performed. An alternative would be a slap with the open hand as a challenge or to punch the person, but this was seen as a statement of equality. Thus, by turning the other cheek, the persecuted was demanding equality.

Wink continues with an interpretation of handing over one's cloak in addition to one's tunic. The debtor has given the shirt off his back, a situation forbidden by Hebrew law as stated in *Deuteronomy*. By giving the lender the cloak as well, the debtor was reduced to nakedness. Wink notes, that public nudity was viewed as bringing shame on the viewer, and not just the naked, as seen in Noah's case (*Genesis 9:20-23*).

Wink interprets the succeeding verse from the Sermon on the Mount (which is picked up in today's Sermon on the Plain) as a method for making the oppressor break the law. The commonly invoked Roman law of what was known as Angaria allowed the Roman authorities to demand that inhabitants of occupied territories carry messages and equipment the distance of one mile post, but prohibited forcing an individual to go further than a single mile, at the risk of suffering disciplinary actions. In this example, the nonviolent interpretation sees Jesus as placing criticism on an unjust and hated Roman law, as well as clarifying the teaching to extend beyond Jewish law.ⁱⁱⁱ In most recent times, leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and M. Gandhi have used the "turn your cheek speech" as a major portion of their rhetoric; Malcolm X held an opposing set of views about how one was to deal with the philosophy behind the phrase. The discussion in theological circles continues...

Of all the other parts of this passage, perhaps the most difficult and trying to take stock of is that notion that we should love our enemies. Loving our neighbors is easier to grasp; now we have to love those who probably do not care for us. Why, it's too much! The Christian theologian Thomas Christianson has it right when he writes in *Relevant* magazine that "this is Jesus' most difficult command."^{iv} How much do you love the members of ISIS? Or the latest

person who shot up a school or church or movie theater? That question may seem absurd. And maybe it is. I think “love your enemies” is the most unreasonable thing Jesus says.

And that’s saying something, because it’s coming from a guy who also says stuff like “eat my flesh and drink my blood,” “hate your mother and father” and “sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor” (John 6:56, Luke 14:26 and Matthew 19:21, respectively).

But love your enemies? Come on.

Jesus and His audience lived under an oppressive occupying Roman government. The Romans employed torture and murder to keep people in line. Everyone listening to Jesus talk about this “love your enemies” stuff had plenty of opportunities to experience “I hate you with every ounce of my guts” enemies in the soldiers and prefects that carried out this daily social domination.

As I read about the latest shooting, or the latest beheading, my natural response is to dehumanize the people who do these things. I think of them as monsters. Or demons. Or something else that allows me to pretend that they are not fellow humans.

But that’s not true.

Each one was born. Each one has a mother and a father. They eat. They drink. They have personal stories and experiences full of pain and joy.

They are human. And if I take the narrative of the Bible to be true, they are fellow children of God. They are loved by God.

I want to be very clear: I’m not supporting or accepting of terrorism or mass shootings. I’m also not arguing against legal consequences for those actions.

But if I hate the people who undertake these actions, I am not hating monsters or demons. I’m hating fellow humans.

Some are suffering from mental illness, or from personal anguish or from religious manipulation. In the midst of grief and anger for those who suffer, can I not spare some compassion for those who have missed out on the life filled with grace and hope that Jesus has called all of us to live?

We like to live in a binary, black and white world, where everyone is basically “good” or “bad.” But life isn’t so cut and dried. Someone can be guilty of terrible things and still deserve compassion.

I’m not seeking to humanize terrorists and murderers because they deserve it or because I am ignoring their actions.

I’m seeking to humanize them because it’s true.

It is also the only way we can hope to stem the tide of terrorism and shootings at schools and malls and workplaces and houses of worship.

Because if these actions are the work of monsters and demons, I am powerless to stop them. I can only shake my head and feel sad that such beings cannot be stopped.

But if I'm dealing with humans, I can have hope. Hope that messages of love and acceptance and peace can be heard. Hope that God can redeem even the worst of sinners. Hope that God can redeem my deep, dark sins, too.

I look to examples like the Civil Rights movement, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, where I see clearly that only when we treat our adversaries as humans—no matter how flawed—can we hope to prevail in our cause: the cause of ultimate justice. The belief that God will eventually set all the wrongs to right.

As Miroslav Volf says in *Exclusion and Embrace*, "If you want justice and nothing but justice, you will inevitably get injustice. If you want justice without injustice, you must want love."^v And that, folks, is what we want of all that we are asked for by God, and it is all that we ultimately ask for. May God bless us with the wisdom to know what the best is for us and the world around us, and to make choices that lead to peace.

ⁱ <https://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-outlines/46741/turn-the-other-cheek/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/turn-other-cheek.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turning_the_other_cheek

^{iv} <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/worldview/what-it-actually-means-love-your-enemies>

^v *Ibid.*