

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

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Matthew 5: 38-48

“The Courage to be Free”

“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 an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

These words from the Sermon on the Mount are extremely puzzling and have often been used to paint the Christian way as one of ineffectual submission. As though being a doormat is a virtue. At the other extreme, they have sometimes been used to justify physical violence in a domestic situation.

The difficulty stems from the translation of the first sentence “Do not resist an evildoer.” The closest translation to the original is to be found in ‘The Scholars Version’. “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil.” So this is not about non-resistance; it is about non-violent resistance. Jesus’ whole life and death testifies to this because this is how he saw God. Jesus made it clear that God loves everyone, even those antagonistic to God.

Non-violent resistance appears in many cultures and religions as a way of living or of bringing about social change – Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. Ghandi once said “The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as non-violent are Christians.”

I

Before we take that any further, let us examine what a difference it makes for us to interpret Jesus’ examples in the light of non-violent resistance. We must remember that Jesus was one of the peasant class who belonged to a conquered people. The might of Rome was absolute. To resist was fatal. Jesus’ listeners would know exactly the situations he was describing. Walter Wink gives these explanations.

1. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”

Why the right cheek? We need to understand the importance of handedness in the ancient world. The right hand was the important hand, the hand of righteousness. The left hand was unclean. A person of wealth and power would only strike another person with the right hand. In a fight, a right handed fist would strike the left cheek of the opponent. And that is the way it was between equals. If the right hand is to strike the right cheek of someone, it could only be done as a back-handed slap. This is the way that a superior would pull an inferior into line. It is what happened in that society between master and slave; between men and women; between parents and children; between Romans and Jews.

So if a slave for example, after being slapped, turns the left cheek it is impossible for the master to do anything. He cannot use his left hand – that is taboo. He cannot use his right hand because that would raise the slave to that of an equal. In other words, the slave, in one

single action, has rendered the master impotent. The master has lost control and the slave is now in charge of the situation.

2. *"If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well"*

Again this speaks directly to those who have very little in an occupied state. As things become worse and worse in a system where taxing is common and peasants are stripped of so much of what they have, the powerful can sue them and take so much that they can have little left. Jesus portrays the extreme situation where a person has nothing left but the clothes he stands up in. If a creditor then demands his coat, he should give him his cloak as well. If he does this, he would leave the court without any clothes which is taboo. But people of the time would not blame the person who was naked. They would ask who was so inhumane as to take from a man everything he has. This would leave the creditor open to ridicule and a target for derision. But more than that, it has the effect of showing the creditor the result of his actions and gives him the opportunity for repentance.

3. *"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile"*

This is a direct result of Imperial Roman law. A soldier was entitled to conscript any civilian of an occupied country to carry his pack – but only for one mile. If the conscript then willingly went another mile this would mean that the soldier would be very confused as to what the motives of the civilian are. Can you imagine what it would be like if it got out that the soldier was pleading with a Jew to return his pack? The conscript, by cheerfully going along with the situation, has now taken control of what is happening and drawn attention to the hardship of the law. And the soldier would think about the injustice of such a law and it may affect how he responded next time.

All these are Jesus' dramatic examples of non-violent resistance. And today, there are many oppressive regimes whose citizens would be able to identify with Jesus' stories of non-violent resistance.

We are all very familiar with the idea of using words or pictures to draw attention to injustice. With modern media it is common-place for a person to take on an unjust law or a corrupt system by lampooning the issue and leaving the injustice exposed. It is the basis of political cartooning because it makes light of the power relationship – the most important thing the powerful have! It also empowers the oppressed. The rapid rise of social networking media throughout the world has empowered many people to non-violent action. (Unfortunately, these same media can be used for urging violent action.) It is not surprising that the first things that repressive regimes do in times of internal unrest is to shutdown the Internet, mobile phones and independent media outlets if they are able.

For a good example of non-violent protest we only have to think of the events in Egypt where people took to the streets to protest. Thousands of men and women, many with their children, marched to express their demand for freedom from a tyrannical regime. For me, there was an unforgettable scene when the protesters were confronted by pro-government demonstrators urged on by a few government stooges. Things looked ugly as the stooges picked up rocks to throw in an action clearly designed to provoke a violent response. The situation was tense. An Imam moved forward out of the front row and moved into the gap between the two groups. He then turned and obviously called for peace and calm. Those in the front of the pro-government group turned on the stooges and demanded they drop the rocks, which they did.

II

The idea of non-violent resistance, however, is not sufficient in itself to fully understand all that Jesus had in mind. This must be related to the next section in which he says, "Love your enemies ..." (vv.44-45).

Here is another word we, in our times, stumble over. Love in this context has nothing to do with emotion. Rather, it means 'love-in-action'. It is not a feeling, it is what we do. I remember some years ago when some Aboriginal communities were being treated very badly by government agencies, an elder made the following comment. He said that his people did not want others to 'love' the Aboriginal people. What they wanted was others to respect the Aboriginal people. He went on to describe how the two sides should listen to each other negotiate as equals. It was as though they were all family. It seems to me that this is an acknowledgement that they are both family. And that is a pretty good understanding of the meaning of Christian love. It is the essence of "Love your enemies" or for that matter "Love your neighbor". All humanity is loved and valued by God and non-violence is a quality of the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

This changes the way in which non-violent resistance is exercised. It is obvious that Christian non-violence is not about proving one's point for a cause or group. About simply saying I'm right and you're wrong. It cannot be used for any selfish reason. It is important that self-righteousness does not creep in as this often lead to a sense of superiority that provokes the other. Doing this is not as easy as it sounds since we are often unaware of being self-righteous. Non-violence must be expressed in love. i.e. In respecting the integrity of the other.

There is nothing passive about this. It is always about action of some kind. When confronted by violence, non-violent resistance entails putting one's life on the line for the cause of truth and justice for the benefit of humanity. It is about making the world a better place. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton puts it this way:

"Christian non-violence is not built on a pre-supposed division, but on the basic unity of humankind. It is not out of the conversion of the wicked to the ideas of the good, but for healing and reconciliation."

This requires a courage that ensures that action is all about truth and the rights of others. Merton goes on to declare that there are tests of sincerity for those who would practice non-violence. Do you see good in others? Are you prepared to see that they are not completely inhuman, wrong, cruel, unreasonable, etc. Would you listen to the other and be prepared to agree with them if they showed you a new truth? If we are open to others we can learn from their perspective and bring new insights to our own truth. This is a very threatening thing to do because it challenges our insecurity to what we believe. It strikes at the heart of our fears which cry out for retaliation in kind on the one hand or total submission on the other. It takes real courage to stand up and resist the powerful in a non-violent way and yet still be prepared to embrace the humanity of the other.

But where does this courage come from? It comes from a view of hope which has these attributes –

- Humankind is basically good.
- People have great potential which can be realized by grace and love.
- Love and trust are preferable to hate and suspicion.
- Humans want and need peace and order in their lives.

It is this hope that provides the courage to build a better world infused with love and peace and justice for all.
And that is what Christians call the “Kingdom of God”.