

Turning the Other Cheek

Matthew 5:38-48

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The idea of turning the other cheek is probably the most misunderstood passage in the whole Bible. On the surface, it makes being a Christian look like being a punching bag. Jesus never intended that! His first followers would not have understood it that way and neither should we.

The real message is **‘don’t become the evil you resist.’** If violence is an evil, then let’s not respond to evil with evil; let’s not respond to violence with violence. Let’s break the cycle of violence. Jesus is asking his followers to seek a different response. He doesn’t want us to be punching bags; neither does he want us to sink to the level of those who violate us. He wants us to find a third way, a non-violent way.

His suggestion about turning the other cheek can only be grasped by understanding the culture of that day. The Biblical scholar, Walter Wink, really helps us with this. Turning the other cheek was actually a very clever strategy for forcing the violator into an impossible contortion of arm and wrist and elbow. The social mores of the day allowed for slapping, but only with the back of the right hand, never the palm, and NEVER with the left hand. In short, the strategy, turn the other cheek, brings a measure of shame on the attacker by robbing him of his power. Anyone hearing this clever teaching would have smiled one of those “aha” smiles that accompanies a brilliant revelation. Anyone hearing this teaching on turning the other cheek would be instantly wowed, and would see the value in finding the third way, the way of non-violence.

A close examination of the Bible reveals that Jesus resisted evil at every turn, but found ways to do so without violating people or without escalating the conflict. He was a master at finding a third way.

He wasn't big on being a punching bag; nor did he advocate returning evil for evil. He just had confidence that when people of faith seek a more excellent way to respond to violence, they find that God moves with them and opens for them a way they had not imagined.

Today, violence takes the form of bullying. We read about this in the newspaper. We hear about this from our children and grandchildren. Bullying is really a form of violence. We are not to tolerate it. Neither are we to respond in-kind, thus lowering ourselves to the very evil we hope to resist. In my view, bullying has a lot to do with self-esteem, low self-esteem. A bully bullies in order to feel better about him or her self. An appropriate response from the faith community is to address that low self-esteem, to get to the root of the violence, and to be party to a systemic change within the individual. Our Christian faith is about transformation. The third way is about finding a strategy that doesn't just cope with a bully, or hold the bully at an arm's length; but that actually moves beyond coping to healing. This is the work of the whole community: the neighbor, the parent, the pastor, the counselor, the teacher, the bus driver, the den mother, the clerk at the ice cream shop. It takes a community, acting on faith, to eliminate bullying.

Non-violence is a counter-intuitive behavior. When somebody punches me in the nose, my first thought is to punch back. I admit I've done that on occasion, returned violence for violence, insult for insult. But it just ends up with two bloody noses and two people keeping their distance for a very long time. Not exactly what Jesus had in mind.

I believe when Jesus suggested turning the other cheek he was really suggesting that we buy some time, time to consider a response that might have a different outcome, that might lead toward something that looks more like peace than like a knuckle sandwich. So, our Christian faith calls for counter-intuitive behavior.

It would be easy for a church to post signs all around its property, 'Bully Free Zone.' But all that accomplishes is that the bullies go someplace else. More to the point would be signs that say, 'Bullies Welcome, Be Prepared for an Infusion of Self-Esteem!'

Non-violence takes on many different forms. For one of our sons, it means being a vegetarian. For some, it means lobbying against the death penalty. For some, it means using inclusive language. For some, it means refusing to use the language of sarcasm. There is an invitation in the text for today for families and churches and communities and governments to talk openly about what form non-violence might take as we seek to live faithful lives.

It's in John's Gospel that we find the story of Jesus teaching a crowd of people when some men push their way into the midst of the circle dragging with them a woman caught in some adulterous behavior. They confront him boldly, asking, 'Moses says we should stone the likes of this woman to death. What do you say?' What Jesus does in the face of this violent confrontation is to turn the other cheek; that is to say, he buys some time. He kneels down and uses his finger to doodle a bit in the dust. As he doodles with his finger, he searches his heart for that third way. Then he stands back up and says to the bullies, "The one among you who is without sin, go ahead and cast the first stone." And one by one, beginning with the eldest, they all depart. They all go away. The tension is diffused.

In all of Scripture I do not know of a more powerful illustration of this principle of non-violence. It keeps me up at night.

When I was a child, I read this passage about turning the other cheek. I thought it was foolish. I thought about the bullies in my neighborhood up on Kimberly Lane who will remain un-named. I knew that I wouldn't allow myself to be a punching bag for them.

But I don't recall anyone helping me to find the third way, the way of non-violence. So, I am hoping it can be different for this present generation of children. I am committed to supporting anyone anytime who wishes to be counter-intuitive, who is open to finding the third way. In the greatest of hope, Amen!