

“Love Your Enemies! Really Jesus?!”

Date: Feb. 20, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

Theme: Love, non-retaliation

Occasion: Epiphany 7, Year A

What do you do when a competitor puts out a false report about your product to the customers? Do you circulate a negative report about his product? What do you do when someone offends you, calls you a name, or slights you in some way? Do you write them out of your life, talk about them behind their back, or seek revenge?

Honest answers to these questions show whether we are with Jesus, or against him, in one of his most radical stands. Jesus taught us to never retaliate, but instead to win over an aggressor by tough, wise love.

In the movie “Ghandi,” depicting the life of this great Indian leader, Ghandi is walking one day with a Presbyterian missionary, Charlie Andrews. The two suddenly find their way blocked by young thugs. Rev. Andrews takes one look at the menacing gansters and decides to run for it.

Ghandi stops him and asks, “Doesn’t the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the right cheek, you should offer him the left?” Rev. Andrews mumbles something about Jesus speaking metaphorically. Ghandi replies, “I’m not so sure. I suspect he meant you must show courage - be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show you will not strike back, nor will you be turned aside.”

Later, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. would take this principle and use it to change America. King used to say, “No man can pull me down so low to make me hate him.” The real goal, said King, was not to defeat the white man, but to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor, and to challenge his false sense of

superiority. “The goal is reconciliation, redemption, the creation of the beloved community.”

I don't know about you, but I find this teaching extremely challenging. Our natural tendency is to want to get even, to strike back, to make the other guy pay for what he's done. Our sense of fairness wants the bad guy to get what's coming to him.

One day, a truck driver stopped at a restaurant for dinner and ordered a steak. Before he could eat it, in walked a motorcycle gang, with dirty leather jackets and long, unkempt hair. They took the man's steak, cut it into six pieces and ate it. The driver said nothing. He simply paid the bill and walked out.

One of the gang members said, “That man couldn't talk. He didn't say a word.” Another one said, “He couldn't fight either; he didn't lift a hand.” One of the waitresses added, “I would say he couldn't drive either. On his way out of the parking lot, he ran over six motorcycles.”

Something in us loves that story, because we like retaliation. We secretly want revenge on our enemies. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's going against our human nature. Do you remember what our church vision statement says? We say, that “our vision is to help people discover, experience and know the love and presence of Jesus Christ.” Revenge and retaliation are not a part of the Christian vision.

Instead of revenge and retaliation, we are invited to practice a kind of love that will transform the world. Jesus gave us three examples of what this world-changing love might look like. **First, he says,** “If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Let me try to explain what's going on in this example.

Most people were right-handed, so if someone slapped you on the right cheek, he would have to hit you with the back of his hand. That was considered the ultimate insult. Therefore, Jesus is saying, do not return insult for insult. Think about what this might mean. Let's suppose that the newspaper publishes a story accusing you of dishonesty. Would you sue? What if your child were unjustly accused of cheating? Would you try to get the teacher fired? Has revenge ever helped someone to discover, experience or know the love and presence of Jesus? Has retaliation ever helped *you* to feel God's presence? Do two wrongs ever make a right?

Now, let me say this. Jesus is not forbidding self-defense. He is not telling people to stay in situations where they suffer physical or emotional abuse. Jesus did not mean that we should become doormats. I believe that police officers need and should carry guns. I believe in a strong national defense, because it deters aggression.

Many of us had to deal with a school-yard bully when we were growing up. To run from the bully only made him worse. The most loving thing you could do for the bully was to stand up to him, to send him a message that bullying does not work. But after you stand up to the bully, it would be wrong to start bullying the bully, or to become the new bully on the playground.

The meaning of "turn the other cheek," is this - don't return insult for insult.

The second example that Jesus gave was this one "If anyone sues you for your tunic, give him your cloak as well." The tunic was that long, sack-like undergarment made of cotton or linen. Most Jews had two or three of these. But the cloak was much more valuable. It was that great blanket-like outer garment, which served as a robe by day and a blanket by night. Jewish law stated that a man's cloak

could not be taken away from him overnight.

But Jesus is saying: Don't stand on your legal rights. If it serves the ministry, be willing to surrender one's legal rights. Such an attitude, if it became widespread, could put a lot of lawyers out of work. Because the prevailing attitude is stick up for number one - yourself. Lots of people are trying to sue somebody.

Jesus invites us - he challenges us - not to insist on being right. Let it go. Don't force the issue. Accept a little indignity, to make the point. Love is more powerful than the law. You may be right to insist on your rights. But does it show love?

In verse 41, Jesus gave us a third example. "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." Talk about a real-life situation, this was it. The hated Roman soldiers were occupying the nation. Roman law decreed that a soldier could force any citizen to carry his baggage, but not for more than one mile.

It was this principle which allowed the romans to force Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus. The Jews hated that law with a passion. Jesus had the gall to ask them to go an extra mile with those hated Romans. Can you imagine the groans that were heard when Jesus first offered this guidance?

The principle is this: When you respond to an unpleasant duty with cheerfulness, rather than resentment, you may win over the person who gave you the duty. If the boss requires that you bring her a cup of coffee, and you resent that, knock on her door 30 minutes later and with a smile, ask if she wants a refill.

Being a Christian disciple means living in our secular world with a radically different spirit. It means to return good for evil, to respond to hate with love. The secular world says, "You're crazy to live like that." But a soft answer *does* turn away wrath. Forgiveness is better than vengeance. Love is the most powerful force

on earth.

Is there somebody in your life that you're feeling resentful towards today? Someone that makes your blood boil, or just thinking about them gets you irritated? You may have some work to do with Jesus, asking him to help you with your feelings.

But then, you've got work to do with your enemy - through your prayers, and through your loving actions.

Yes, this is hard. But with Jesus, the impossible becomes normal. Amen?
Amen.