

## SOME THOUGHTS ON TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

The once was a very successful Irish boxer who was also a very devout Christian. As he grew in the faith, he became a traveling preacher of the Gospel. One day he entered a new town and was setting up his evangelistic tent when two tough thugs came by and saw what he was doing. Not knowing anything about the preacher's background, they made a few insulting remarks to him. The Irishman merely turned and looked at them.

Pressing his luck, one of the hoodlums took a swing and struck the former boxer on one side of his face. He shook it off and said nothing; then he turned his head and offered the other cheek to him. The tough guy was a bit surprised but accommodating, and he hit him on the other cheek.

At that point the preacher took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and said, "The Lord gave me no further instructions." POW!

That's the way a lot of people understand this morning's Gospel passage. No violence . . . up to a point. But when the line is crossed . . . POW!

When Jesus was sitting on that mountainside during his Sermon on the Mount, teaching the crowd that had gathered around him, and he told them, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,' he was quoting an ancient Hebrew law. You can find those familiar words in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19.

Those words Jesus referenced obviously referred to just and fair punishment. "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" told the people of God that retribution against someone who wronged you was acceptable. If you plucked out someone's eye, your eye should be plucked out. If you knocked out someone's tooth, your tooth should also be knocked out. It was an evenhanded and sensible way of dealing with offenses.

But what people often miss is that "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth," was also intended to set boundaries on how much punishment should be doled out. What God was saying through this Old Testament law was that the penalty shouldn't exceed the crime. So, although this commandment legalized fair retribution against a perpetrator, it was also meant to prevent people from

forcing the offender to pay a greater penalty than the offence warranted.

It was to this familiar Hebraic law that Jesus added the startling supplement, “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”

That may well be the most misunderstood passage in the whole Bible.

So, what exactly was Jesus saying? What was the message he was trying to teach?

Well, first of all, let me tell you what Jesus wasn't saying or teaching. He wasn't saying that his followers were supposed to be human punching bags. He wasn't teaching that we have to just stand there and be passive victims of violence and injustice and maliciousness and hatred.

Rather, the real message Jesus was trying to get across to his followers was, “Don't become the evil you're the victim of. Don't sink to the level of your persecutors and oppressors.”

Obviously, Jesus understood that violence was evil. But he was telling his followers, don't respond to violence with violence, because that will only carry on, and possibly even escalate the vicious cycle of hostility and anger and hatred.

I came across a quote from Martin Luther King that was in the newspaper around the time of Martin Luther King Day, and it eloquently expressed what I've just been trying to say: “To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough, and morality enough, to cut off the chain of hate. ”That relates perfectly to us because sensible and moralistic followers of Jesus are called to do everything we can to break the cycle of violence by finding a third way, a non-violent way.

There's a name for this third, non-violent way Jesus was directing us to live by. It's called “passive-resistance.” To be clear, passive-resistance isn't doing nothing in response to evil and letting evil have its way. Rather, it's a way for us to resist, and even fight against evil, without resorting to violence.

For example, take Jesus' words, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” That makes absolutely no sense, unless we understand the culture of Jesus' day. You see, the social custom back then permitted the slapping another person, but only with the back of the right hand, never with the palm and never with the left hand. So, turning the other cheek was actually a shrewd tactic that forced the attacker into an extremely awkward contortion of his arm, wrist and elbow. This made it virtually impossible for the attacker to strike a second blow unless he broke God's religious command, and as

as a result it took away his power and brought a measure of embarrassment on him.

What's important to realize is that the person who turns the other cheek isn't submissively allowing the injustice to continue, but is actively taking control of the situation and resisting the injustice being done in a very powerful but non-violent way.

By the way, many people listening to Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek would have probably smiled one of those "aha" smiles that people do when they experience a brilliant revelation. They would have been immediately wowed and would have seen the logic in Jesus' teaching to try and find a way of dealing with evil and violence without resorting to violence.

When you read the Gospel stories, you quickly discover that Jesus was no doormat. He wasn't a person who simply let evil have its way without putting up a fight. Jesus aggressively resisted evil throughout his entire ministry; but he found ways to do that without harming people in the process or escalating the conflict. Jesus was a master at finding a third way of responding to maliciousness.

It's a common and a huge misconception that Jesus wanted his followers to be human punching bags and allow themselves be impassive victims of brutality and injustice. Make no mistake about it, Jesus was an advocate for standing up against evil. What he didn't support was returning evil for evil. Jesus believed that when people of faith seek a higher, more excellent way to respond to violence, oppression and injustice without resorting to the "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" way of physical force, they would ultimately discover that God would be there with them and open up a way to win the battle that they could never have imagined.

The victory might not come immediately. Indeed, it might take years and years to accomplish. But, in the end, with God's help, good will surely prevail and evil will ultimately be overcome with love.

Clearly the path Jesus calls us to walk is a very difficult one, because, let's face it, non-violence in response to violence is a counter-intuitive behavior. It goes against our human instinct—the instinct for survival and to protect ourselves from harm by fighting fire with fire. If somebody punches me in the nose, my first thought is to punch that person back in response. To be honest, I did that on occasion when I was younger, and responded to violence with violence. But what often resulted was two people with bloody noses who were angrier and more violence-prone than they were before, more deeply alienated, and ended up holding onto their grudge for a lot longer time.

Maybe when Jesus taught his followers to turn the other cheek, what he had in mind was a way to buy some time, time to ponder a response that could bring about a better, more positive outcome: an outcome that would result in peace rather than a knuckle sandwich. But to reach that outcome, the Christian faith calls for counter-intuitive behavior—behavior that resists human instinct and strives for the Christ-ordained goal of resolving conflict without violence.

Many years ago, my grandmother, Nana, worked at the Cumberland Club in Portland. She said that most of the clients she served were very nice people, friendly and kind. But there were a few men who could get downright nasty—especially when they had too much to drink. When I asked my grandmother what she did when someone was mean to her, how she responded to their meanness, I'll never forget her response. She said, "I just kill them with kindness."

What a wonderful concept.

I think that's what Jesus was really saying in his Sermon on the Mount. I think he was telling his followers, when someone is nasty to you, treats you unfairly, wrongs you, hurts you, hits you, and you feel this overwhelming urge to strike back at them with everything you've got and hurt them back, only twice as bad, don't give in to that instinct. It's not the way to go. That's not God's way.

Instead, turn the other cheek. In other words, if you want to kill your persecutor, kill them with kindness.

May God give us the patience and strength to do that whenever we're injured by another person. Amen.