

Epiphany7_YrA_022314_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

In the name of God. Amen.

Good morning. Jim, Ruth and I, and the 4 lay delegates from All Saints: Michael Morrison, Clayton Ryan, and Andi and Bruce Barrett, returned late yesterday afternoon from the 43rd annual convention of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. We did the usual things: we prayed, we heard some wonderful meditations from the convention chaplain, Bishop Don Johnson from the Diocese of West Tennessee, we elected some people to do things, and we voted on some proposed changes to the structure of the diocese.

We also shared good times with one another, good meals and good conversations. You might hear some different opinions about what happened and how those things took place, but in the end, the good news is that the diocese is still here and we are still here, and our jobs as laborers in the vineyards are still here, too! We still have God's work to do and we are equipped to do it, so let's get on with it!

Today's gospel reading from Matthew is yet again a part of the Sermon on the Mount. (It's a pretty long sermon, isn't it - this is the fourth week on it, and most people in the Episcopal Church didn't even hear the first week of it, because on Feb. 2, (the Sunday the reading of the Sermon on the Mount began) we used the readings for the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. But the sermon goes on all the way through chapter 7. We will hear some more of it on Ash Wednesday, but even if we have as many Sundays as are possible in Epiphany (and that's 9), we wouldn't hear the entire sermon. So I guess if you want to know how the rest of it goes, you'll have to read it yourself!

Two weeks ago, we talked about what it means to be the salt of the earth, and what it means to be the light of the world. Last week's portion of the sermon was a pretty uncomfortable part - remember, it was about don't judge anyone else, don't commit adultery, don't get divorced, don't swear falsely, and don't be angry at someone else. Today's lesson revolves around how we should respond non-violently to violence that may be done to us - and also that we should 'be perfect as our

Father in heaven is perfect.' Also uncomfortable sayings, but for different reasons.

There is some background that I learned about from an article by the scholar Walter Wink, in an article entitled "How turning the other cheek defies oppression." I think it is helpful to know this in order to have more understanding of what Jesus means when he says some of the things he says in today's lesson.

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 one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

On the face of things, 'turn the other cheek' sounds like we should be passive, that we should be cowardly doormats in the face of injustice. 'Do not resist evil' also seems to encourage submission. But Jesus' listeners were not the oppressors of the day - they were the oppressed. Why would Jesus want them to not resist that which was oppressing them? Well, he did want them to resist, but in a nonviolent way. Apparently, when the scribes were translating the Greek into English for King James, they translated the Greek as 'resist not evil,' as an act of being docile, when in fact, it meant to resist, but nonviolently.

Before Jesus came along, those who were oppressed had two basic choices: fight or flight. To respond to oppression by fighting, to meet violence with violence, never really turned out well for anyone! To choose flight meant passivity, submission, or at the most, a passive-aggressive insubordination, which also did not have a good outcome. There were no other choices to make.

But Jesus proposed a third way with the examples he used in today's gospel: first he said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Why does he say the right cheek? People in that culture used their right hands for everything; the left hand was used for unclean tasks. If you were having a fistfight, you used your right hand to strike the left cheek. And if you were having a fistfight, it was because the person you were fighting was considered a peer.

But if you were the oppressor, if you had the upper hand (pun intended), you would strike to the right cheek with the back of your right hand - a clear insult, intended

to humiliate, to put someone in their place. This was the normal way to scold an inferior in the culture of the time. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands backhanded wives; parents backhanded children; Romans backhanded Jews. (Walter Wink)

Now remember, the people who are coming to listen to Jesus are not the ones who hit; they are the ones who get hit. To respond to such an admonishment with resistance, or violence, would be crazy, of course. So why does Jesus tell these people to offer the other cheek? Because this action takes away the power that the oppressor has over the one who has been struck, and the one who has been struck can no longer be humiliated. Now the oppressor can't backhand the person again, because it is the left cheek that has been offered and you can't hit it with the back of your right hand. If you should punch the person with your fist, you are acknowledging that that person is a peer, an equal, and that defeats the whole purpose of putting that person down. The whole point, after all, is to demonstrate that you are the person with power and the other has none.

Jesus' second example is set in a court of law. *"...and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well;"* A person is being sued for his outer garment. Why? He is a poor person, made even poorer by being unable to repay his debts, and he is being dragged into court to force repayment out of him. Only the very poorest person would have nothing left but an outer garment to use as collateral. And Jewish law was very clear in saying that an outer garment had to be returned to its owner every evening at sunset, because that was the only thing the poor had to sleep in.

Jesus says if you have to give up your outer garment, give your inner garment as well, because that would mean stripping off all your clothes and strolling out of court stark naked! That image would have surely brought a smile to the faces of those who were listening to Jesus. Why?

Here's why: you have turned the tables on your creditor. Even though you had no hope of winning in this court battle, you have refused to be humiliated. And you have made a protest against the system that lets this kind of humiliation take place. And, according to the Jewish law at the time, although nakedness was definitely taboo, the shame of it also landed on the person who caused the nakedness or who viewed the nakedness. By removing the rest of your garments, the creditor is left with your coat in one hand and your underwear in the other. He

becomes known not as a 'respectable' moneylender, but as a participant in a corrupt system of oppression.

The third example Jesus gives to his listeners is this: *"...and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."* This comes from the practice of forced labor that was used by the Roman soldiers in occupied territories. A soldier was allowed to force a subject to carry his pack, but only for the distance of one mile. To force anyone to go further than that carried a serious penalty under military law.

Why would Jesus ask anyone to go a second mile, then? Because this was another way for the oppressed, the occupied peoples, to assert their dignity as human beings. Think how surprised a soldier would be if, at the end of the mile, the conscript says, "Oh, no, I'll carry it for another mile." Once again, the Jew has the power of choice, the dignity of asserting himself as a human being.

Each of these ways of meeting violence with nonviolence gives the one who is oppressed the chance to realize new self-respect, new dignity. It may not seem like much to most of us here, when we are hardly, if ever, faced with such situations as the oppressed. But it is possible that, if we should find ourselves the oppressors, we might recognize the situation, and have a chance to turn away from that behavior. A better understanding of what Jesus means can always be something that will help us in how we respond to the needs of our neighbors.

Jesus also said, "Love your enemies." That doesn't need explanation.

There is a quote attributed to St. Francis that goes something like: Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary. I've used a lot of words already this morning, but there is a story that I read this week that I think will help our understanding of what it means to love our enemies.

The story is about a policeman named Van de Broek, who testified in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing after apartheid was abolished in South Africa, that he and some other officers had shot an 18-year-old boy at point blank range, and then had burned the body to destroy the evidence. He also related how, eight years later, he had gone back to the boy's home and forced his mother to watch as he tied up her husband, poured gas over him and set him on fire.

As Van de Broek spoke, the room became more and more quiet. When the policeman was finished, the judge turned to the mother and wife of the two who were killed, and asked her, "What do you want from Mr. Van de Broek?" She answered, "I want him to go to the place wmy husband was burned, and gather up the dust there so that I can give him a decent burial." Van de Broek, head down, nodded in assent. Then she said, "Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to my home amd spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real." (Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*)

This woman turned the other cheek, loving her enemy, restoring dignity and bringing hope and healing to herself, to him and to all who hear the story. We don't love our enemies or our neighbors because they deserve it. We love them because they are our sisters, and our brothers, and because God loved us and them first. And if we want to live with dignity, it is not just the thing to do, it is the only thing to do.