

Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In Malcolm Gladwell's book entitled "The Tipping Point," he challenges the reader to make a list of the people whose death would truly leave them devastated. Let's try it - count the number of people. Gladwell says that twelve people is the average. Those people you listed make up what psychologists call our "sympathy group." A sympathy group is that circle of people with whom we can closely connect. Often this group includes one's extended family or ethnicity, and they become the in-group; everyone else in the world, by default, become the out-group.¹ What do we do with this biological tendency to make in-groups and out-groups?

That's where today's gospel can help. However, before we get to that golden nugget, we're going to need to do some historical sifting in this text. Ready? Ok, here's what I read from the gospel, "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."

First things first, this isn't a great translation. A more accurate translation would say, "do not *violently* resist an evildoer." The non-violent nature of this first action is important. It's also important to note that this does not justify in anyway domestic violence. Let me say that again, this passage in no way whatsoever justifies domestic violence. If you are in an unsafe situation, please come talk to me. Jesus is not compelling you to passively accept verbal, physical, or emotional abuse. Here's how we know that: The behaviors that Jesus mentions, namely slapping the other cheek, suing another, and forcing to go a mile, are not things anyone could do. These were things

¹ Ramshaw, Gail. *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*. "Outsider," p308-313.

that only a privileged few were allowed to do. Remember, today's reading is a part of Jesus's famous "sermon on the mount." He says these things to the masses who were likely the ones who were slapped.² Ok, don't check out on me here. This all matters. Let have some fun with this. Can I get two volunteers to come up here?

We need a servant and an owner.

Owner, here's what you need to know: You are an honorable person, and so you like to follow the socio-cultural norms of your time. This is your servant. You own this person. You have power. You have privilege. In your time period, to communicate this rank, privilege, and power you'd often slap your servant. This isn't a random act of violence, you aren't friends, but you are maintaining your public standing. Can you get in the mindset? One final rule, you may ONLY use the backside of your right hand if you want to maintain your social standing.

Servant, you must face your owner and obediently stand there. Got it?

Ok, so let's try the first slap on the right cheek. (Owner slaps servants right cheek with back of the right hand.) Now, servant, if you were to "turn the other cheek" all the way. The left cheek would be exposed. It becomes really hard for the owner to not look awkward while trying to slap the servant with the back of the right hand especially after the servant actively turned the other cheek.

Now, you all that are observing would gasp! The servant turning his cheek exposes the owner to shame and ridicule. The servant might *seem* to be meek, waiting for the second blow, but the owner's only options are to hit the servant with the palm of the right hand, the left hand, or walk away. All of these options would cause him to lose face. (Thanks for your help.)

² <http://www.holytextures.com/2011/02/matthew-5-38-48-year-a-epiphany-7-february-18-february-24-sermon.html>

Now, what is true for this example, and for the next example about suing, and the final example about going an extra mile is this: all three examples both respond with non-violent resistance *and* they expose the dehumanization inherent within their social system and cultural norms. Jesus urges for a non-violent response to evildoers in a way that would expose the socio-cultural assumptions and normative behaviors that are unjust. These principles from this periscope in Matthew have become the biblical ground work for the nonviolent resistance movements around the world, including Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian Independence Movement, and Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, and Alice Lee during the Women's Suffrage Movement. We still see the products of this ideology in strikes, sit-ins, protests, or even in "a day without immigrants" or "a day without women."

If you're like me and lean to pacifism, it is relatively easy for us to sit here today and point fingers at the slave-owning, privileged, violent, and power-wielding owner. It's rewarding and self-justifying to pat ourselves on the back when we engage in non-violent resistance. There's a sense of accomplishment. Yet, how *we* engage during these moments is equally important. For Jesus goes on in his sermon to remind us that it's easy to love those who love us, but it is a challenge to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us.

On top of that, today's reading ends with a challenge to be perfect as God is perfect. If you're a recovering perfectionist, you may want to cross out that final verse in the bible to give you some comfort. After all, you've been fighting against perfectionism and now Jesus tells you to be perfect. Your therapist won't approve! Yet, the Greek word translated as "perfect" here also means "whole" or "complete." My hunch is that this perfection relates back to the rising of the sun and the rain a few verses earlier. Jesus implored us to show love to all, just as the rain falls and the sun rises on all. Being perfect is showing complete, full, or whole love – not in part but in fullness. And

when we talk about love it's not like the swooning of a newly dating couple. Love means to be attached to the person, to be devoted, to be loyal, to be bonded, and to seek out their welfare.

At first glance, I don't think this seems all that hard. As far as I know, I don't have any real enemies. After all, I can say that I love someone while not really liking them, right? And can't avoiding that person help with the illusion that I don't hate them? A colleague of mine writes that in our current political climate there is a heightened difference between people, groups, family members, and friends. She says, "I feel as though I'm struggling between not-hate, and advocating for what I believe to be biblical imperatives. And there are people who disagree with me who could also [say that] with just as much honesty."³

So, what do we do? According to Jesus's sermon, we pray. We pray not that other's will change their minds and we not only pray for justice and peace, but we also pray for the *people* with whom we disagree. You see, praying is much more difficult than not-hating them. Not hating someone is passive; prayer is far more active. I don't believe that those prayers will "change their hearts." Let's be honest, a prayer asking for another to change is masked hatred; Christians are really good at masking hate with prayer. Hate is the problem not matter how we disguise it. Instead, with my prayer I have to be honest that they will ultimately change *my* heart. My heart is changed because I start to see that person as I believe God sees all people. I begin to see that individual as flawed *and* loved. I begin to see that person as sinner *and* saint. I see them as a whole person with imperfections *and* gifts to offer this world. I begin to acknowledge that the other looks at a lot like, well, me. And while that does not make me any less passionate about justice or peace, it does help me see the other in a wholistic way. I begin to see Obama as flawed *and* loved, and I see Trump as a sinner *and* a saint, and I see each colleague and church member with imperfections *and* gifts to

³ <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2017/02/13/praying-for-enemies/>

share, and I see my own egocentrism *and* altruism. In the end, the prayers for my opponents and those who cause me harm might make me work even harder for justice *and* bring a little more softness in my heart.

So, after all that sifting we've found the golden nugget! Hopefully when you analyze this nugget, you'll discover that the Gospel for today is about outsiders. First, a powerful owner and servant - one in the in-group and one in the out-group. Then, our enemies as the out-group and our like-minded friends as the in-group. But, the thing is, that no matter if we're a part of the in-group or the out-group the real problem is the system. So, when we stand up for peace through nonviolence like the servant, we overturn the systems of violence. When we speak love to *all* people like the rain falls on enemy and friend alike, then the systems of hate and judgement fall away. For as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Today our readings remind us that we're called to move beyond insiders and outsiders. We're called to truly love all people. We're also made aware that we will stumble and fail, that people will frustrate us, and we'll use power and privilege to the detriment of others. Yet, there is good news. Our God continues to provide the sun and rain even in the midst of our mess ups. Our God remembers that we are human, in all our contradictions. Our God reminds us that even with our flaws we are blessed and loved. Then, we are sent to share this good news by working to non-violently expose injustice, by praying for others, and by being transformed by God's love and our prayers. Amen.