

Creative Defiance of Oppression, Even Joyful  
Sermon preached at Hope Central Church  
Year A, 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, 2/23/14  
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Matthew 5:38-48

“You’ve heard the commandment, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, offer no resistance whatsoever when you’re confronted with violence. when someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other. If anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, hand over your coat as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go two miles. Give to those who beg from you. And don’t turn your back on those who want to borrow from you. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor—but hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. This will prove that you are children of God. For God makes the sun rise on bad and good alike; God’s rain falls on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don’t tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don’t Gentiles do as much? Therefore be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect.”

We who grew up in the church up grew up with the knowledge that we should turn the other cheek, and be submissive about it. If we’re asked for our shirt, we should give away our cloak, too - oh what sublime submission and meekness. And if we’re asked to carry something a mile, then we should do it for two.

I don’t know about you but I’ve tried to live by these “Christian” standards as also have many battered women, as have folks who have been subjugated by colonization, by racism, by homophobia, by class. We have this standard by which we have thought we are truly Christian, and we have applied it to the idea of being nice, getting by, not causing waves, not drawing attention to our selves and some of us have been able to really live this way, and others of us have given nice lip service to offering our cheek, our clothes, our extra mile.

I’ve applied this scriptural advice to driving, or tried at least. When a car pulls up to my right at a red light and the minute, the car that so rudely pulled up on my right, zooms on ahead, I know I have the temptation to zoom too, but I’ve been thinking all my life that really, I ought to submit and let that blankety blank car zoom ahead, to turn the other cheek.

I’ve been in the car with J Conlon who’s working on the same thing. She says to the offensive and offending car driver, go ahead, you must have an emergency, and then she goes on to say a little prayer for the driver and the “emergency.”

J’s much more advanced than me spiritually. She’s more mature, I’d say, because I still battle between wanting to ram my car into the offending car to teach that driver a lesson and going submissive. I think J is doing what Jesus wants for us, to be mature, for at the end of the reading today, we told that we should be perfect as God is perfect, but a better translation of the word perfection is mature, whole.

I’m pretty sure that Jesus wasn’t talking about cars at red lights because there weren’t cars or red lights then. I think he wasn’t talking petty oppression, but systematic

oppression for that what his people were - systematically oppressed by the Roman soldiers, the theft of property, high taxes, being pressed into servitude with no way to say no that was not suicide.

One day, before I was pastor here at Hope Central, I was driving in my pretty blue, S-10 extended cab, Chevy pick up truck through the intersection right here at the bottom of the hill, at Elm, Seaverns and Gordon St. A white guy in a long white station wagon failed to stop at the stop sign on the down hill side of Elm St. He didn't stop, he didn't have the right away, I had to stop suddenly, and I applied the horn, and he, through the open window, yelled, "Dyke!" Maybe I told you this story before, but I had a lot of reactions

1. What, I thought, right here in my own neighborhood? where I thought I was safe.
2. I wanted to follow him and explain to him what he'd done wrong and he'd see I was a nice person and wouldn't call me a name.
3. I wanted to squash him like a bug.
4. I wanted to get his license plate, and turn him into the police because I am protected by hate speech and hate crimes
5. I wanted to cower, because I have lived through a time and place where living in the world as I am was very dangerous to my physical and mental health.

I wasted a lot of time worrying about this man because what we do when we've been in danger is to rehearse what happened and what we'll do next time. Fight, flight, or freeze - the three reactions.

I think about folks who are danger every day, women and men who get pounded by their partners, people in the West Bank whose houses get bulldozed, people of color still here in this country, GLBT especially transfolks who are murdered at twice the rate of gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual folks, and our youth of color, all our neighbors.

In our scripture today, we're still with Jesus, in the book of Matthew, still delivering the sermon on the Mount, these three weeks. Jesus has much to teach us about training our minds, hearts and spirits to stay centered, to not get distracted by fear, deception, and hate.

This week, Jesus is giving the folks who lived under the occupation of Rome creative ideas for the work of staying alive, alert and growing mature.

I'm indebted to Dr. Walter Wink's work on this scripture on our this morning. Dr. Wink was a theologian and seminary professor at Union Theological and Auburn Seminary in NYC. He lived the end of his life in Springfield, MA. He died just about a year ago.

Here is what he says - oppression offers humiliation and the acceptance of humiliation - it requires the loss of agency, one's own ability to order one's life and one's self worth.

Katie Cannon, my major professor in seminary at the Episcopal Divinity School, an African American woman from North Carolina who's grandfather was a slave said that once you've taken away someone's sense of dignity, you only have to show them the back door, once.

Dr. Walter Wink deals thusly with our scripture. He said that Jesus reaffirmed what every Jew knows, that a good Jew does not hate his or her enemies. This is founded is scripture in Leviticus 19.

Then Jesus goes on to say that if someone strikes you on your right cheek, instead of your left, it is an offered act of humiliation - a backhand of the attacker's right hand or a slap of one's left hand, the hand with which one cleans oneself - a blow specifically for humiliation. By offering the left cheek, one offers a blow of the right hand, the hand offered an equal. It's not that I'm offering violence as a solution, but you see the bind it puts the attacker in, a blow to humiliate, and an additional offering for a blow that denies the humiliation.

(here, Allie, a grand-daughter of Vivian Reilly, a saint of the church who died a year ago today, stood to help me show this idea – Blessed be Allie!)

Oh, one has to be alive and in the moment to understand the dynamic of humiliation countered by the offering to receive another blow if but the attacker would see the equality of the individuals.

Then Jesus talks about the giving of the shirt and the cloak. The Romans State in occupation, and the collaborating Jews kept the regular folks so indebted and so extremely poor that, for some, all a person pursuing a repayment could take was the shirt on a person's back. Jesus said, that if the shirt is required by the debtor, if that's really the repayment required - a person's only shirt, then the debtor should also give their cloak, thus rendering the poor person naked. *Because*, in those times, the sin of nakedness was not on the naked person, but was on the person who looked on one's nakedness. Thus stripping, transferred the state of sin to the unjust collector. In addition, the naked person strolling around town pointed not the debtor's sin, but to the unjustness of the collector.

Subversive, eh? It's not a kind of subversive I'm willing to be, myself, but creative, yes? This is what we want not only to live our lives, but to name, show, fix, repair systems that intend to squash and control the spark of God in each human. And to do it creatively.

Did you see the sign on face book that a restaurant in Arizona put in front of their pizza joint in protest of the recent legislation there saying that for religious reasons, businesses owners need not serve gay people. You got to wonder if the folks in Arizona heard of the luncheon counter sit ins in the 60's in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, the Carolinas? When will they ever learn? Anyway, the pizza joint's sign said it refuses to serve Arizona Legislators. Humor, courage, a willingness to be dignified in whole new ways.

Lastly, in our scripture this morning, Jesus is all about going the extra mile, but here's the back ground. A Roman soldier or official by law, by rule, could make a Jew haul anything for one mile, but no more. Here, I give you Walter Wink's words because they're too good.

"The rules are Caesar's but not how one responds to the rules. The response is God's, and Caesar has no power over that. Imagine then the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack (sixty-five to eighty-five pounds in full gear). You say, "Oh no, let me carry it another

mile." Normally he has to coerce your kinsmen to carry his pack; now you do it cheerfully and will not stop! Is this a provocation? Are you insulting his strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to make you go farther than you should? Are you planning to file a complaint? To create trouble?

From a situation of servile enforcement, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off-balance by being deprived of the predictability of your response. Imagine the hilarious situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew, "Aw, come on, please give me back my pack!" The humour of this scene may escape those who picture it through sanctimonious eyes. It could scarcely, however, have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have delighted in the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors."

Walter Wink goes on to say about creative resistance to oppression, "from a situation of servile enforcement, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of choice."

I wish, when that white man in that long white station wagon called me a dyke, I wished I'd said, "Yes sir, you are perceptive and know your lesbians when you see them," and then I wish I'd gotten on with myself.

I wish for our congregation that seeks to contribute to the repair of the world, that we too get on with our work of creative standing against oppression, our own and the oppression of others. We who are by-standers also react by fright, flight or freeze. We don't know whether in response to the systemic oppression of others what we should do.

So I want to offer some suggestions and I hope, some wisdom for our work together.

If we understand our worthiness, our gloriousness, we won't use the back door except to save our lives or the lives of others, and even if we do use the back door, we understand that we are made in God's own splendid image.

If we understand our worthiness, we can identify it in others so when we are lending a hand to repair the world, we are not doing it as charity. We are contributing because we are not free until all are free to be glorious.

Practice prayer often so that when we are insulted or offered humiliation, we can quickly do as J does, in little and big things, pray for the person who offers the humiliation. By our prayer for them, we understand that we are not their victim, and we identify with their humanity. By practicing, instead of taking weeks or years to get re-centered on God and our work spiritual work, it might take seconds.

Share the stories of how we have gotten through, strategies we have used, funny snappy come backs that we may say aloud or shout quietly in our hearts. Teach each other how to be fully human and glorious even though we have been victims. Speak also of the times we offered humiliation to another, so that even this behavior turns out to be human.

Practice joy, even when we are afraid, even when we are paralyzed, even when we are running, because joy makes make running into dance, sing, praise, love. Practice joy.

Jesus was a great teacher, and we are great learners, because what we want is make ultimate meaning, to move toward the heart of God, to repair the world. Walk together, beloved. That is our practice.

Amen.