

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is challenging. While much of the reading was the focus of my Annual Meeting report earlier this month, I found myself in a different social location this time around. You see, instead of looking at this passage through the lens of the institution that this is Wicker Park Lutheran Church, I entered it in a more personal manner. This time, I saw it through a lens of the powerless.

As I watch national leaders erase gender identity, deny climate change, rewrite global partnerships, and destroy diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, I struggled to imagine how I can take seriously Jesus' words among the face slapping and coat taking of my values and our congregation's values. Jesus said to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Or, to translate a bit differently from the Greek, "pray for those who insult or hurt you." And Jesus' directive is much more palatable when you are the one who has control and power to be merciful, but it's much more difficult when you are the one waiting or begging for mercy.

As the oppressed, at first, we can say that when "they go low we go high." We say that we won't sink into vengeful retribution. After all, we know that revenge is contrary to the gospel. That "an eye for an eye" will only make everyone blind. But over time when they seem to go lower and lower and lower, we might think "enough, let's go low because it's not worth our energy

trying to go high.” But do we *really* want to see how low everyone can go? Is that what God imagined for us? Is God’s vision to see who can go the lowest to win some cosmic game of limbo? Of course not! It’s very clear in today’s reading that using violence is not the answer. After all, Jesus didn’t say destroy your oppressor; rather, he said to “turn the other cheek.”

So, is Jesus suggesting that we just roll over and take it? That we be passive and submissive? Well, the famous theologian Walter Wink looked at the context of this often-misunderstood teaching. Using a similar passage from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, he analyzed the act of turning the other cheek.¹ What he discovered was that in the cultural context of Jesus’ time, a backhanded slap to the right cheek was a method used by superiors to assert dominance over those they considered inferior, like slaves and subordinates. By turning the other cheek, the person subjected to the humiliation forces the aggressor into a position where they cannot repeat the backhanded slap without acknowledging the other’s equality. This act transforms the encounter, compelling the oppressor to confront the humanity and dignity of the person that they intended to demean. That makes “turning the other cheek” an act of defiance while at the same time both maintaining one’s dignity while exposing and challenging the injustice of the oppressor’s action. It exemplifies what Wink describes as Jesus’ “Third Way” – that is, a method of resisting evil that avoids both violent retaliation and passive submission, instead opting for assertive, creative nonviolence.² Essentially, Jesus invites us to use smarter tactics of love.

² <https://www.lutheranpeace.org/articles/transcript-of-walter-winks-nonviolence-for-the-violent/>

You see, even this act of nonviolent resistance focuses on the key aspect of today's passage, that is to love your enemies. The act reminds the oppressor of the oppressed person's humanity, and the oppressed person is reminded to hate the injustice not the person. It also allows the oppressed to reclaim love of self amid the violating act of another. Overall, the passage is a reminder that it's easy to love the people you like, but it's much harder to love the jerks. Yet, Jesus told us to love the jerks. After all, what is clear throughout all the Scriptures is a reminder that there was a time when you were a jerk and someone loved you.

Today's passage also reminds us of the importance of both *speaking* love and *acting on* love. Diana Butler Bass says that "Jesus spoke about truth, love, and justice all the time. But does anyone honestly believe that he would have been remembered for two millennia without the follow-up performance? Without turning water into wine? Without healing the sick? Without stilling the sea? Without washing the feet of his friends? Without feeding the hungry? Without turning over the tables? Without forgiving the criminal who hung next to him at his own execution? Jesus showed a different way until he gave up his last breath." Yes, words matter. But action really makes the point.

You see, the takeaway from today's reading is: Don't give in to injustice. And don't be a Jesus doormat. Love isn't about giving in. It is about going beyond. Embrace the tactics of Jesus – the tactics of relentless love. The love of the oppressed and the excluded. The love of yourself and your unknown neighbor. The love of the one who tries to harm you and the one whom builds you up. Look for ways to target the injustice while not losing the humanity and belovedness that are inherent in every person. Here Jesus' words once

more: “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, as your loving God is merciful.” May we find ways to show mercy and love to all. May we remember that without justice and fairness, grace turns into permissiveness of all things, but that justice without grace hardens into cruelty. So may we give thanks for God’s abundant generosity and grace. May we “be merciful as your loving God is merciful.” Amen. ^{3, 4}

³ https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-e3c?utm_source=substack&publication_id=47400&post_id=157470206&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&utm_campaign=email-share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=true&r=3gfv3&triedRedirect=true

⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/epiphany7c>