

“Taking Your Cues from God”

St. Paul’s Presbyterian, Hamilton, 23 February 2014

Psalms 119:33-48; Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48; 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

Two weeks ago we heard Jesus call his disciples the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, a lamp held high to give light to the whole house. Then last week we heard him shift from metaphor to antithesis as he spelled out what their being these things would look like:

“You have heard that our forefathers were told... But I say to you...” As in, “You have heard that our forefathers were told, ‘Do not commit murder.’ But I say to you, anyone who nurses anger against a brother or sister, who abuses or sneers at him or her is liable to judgement.” And again, “You have heard that they were told, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, anyone who looks at another lustfully has already committed adultery in his or her heart.”

He radicalized the commandments against murder and adultery to get at the real problem, the state of heart that lies *behind* those evils and from which they arise! The murderer is rightly condemned, but are those whose anger seethes against another, who despise or abuse another, whose will toward another beloved of God is for evil, really all that different at heart?

Likewise, are those who undress others with their eyes all that different inwardly from the actual adulterers they hold in contempt? For all that his teaching here makes perfect sense to us, it is hard because it calls us on our common way of justifying ourselves with the thought that others are worse. It also shows us that in that very thing, we are just as far from the kingdom of God as those we would condemn, which is, of course, disappointing.

Well, if you thought last week’s antitheses were hard, this week’s are worse – much worse.

“You have heard that they were told,” Jesus said, “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth”. This is the law of talion, limiting revenge to strict proportionality. In ancient Israel, it meant that if I cause you to lose an eye, you have the right to gouge out one of my eyes – but not both of them, and certainly not to burn down my house and murder my family. More broadly, it means that if someone wrongs you, you have recourse, both moral and legal, for proportionate compensation.

This, we are prepared to say, also makes perfect sense, and we take this for granted as basic to any concept of justice.

“But I say to you,” Jesus said, “do not resist one who wrongs you”, or, “do not resist an evildoer.” A strike on the right cheek (from a right-handed person) is a back-handed blow – an insult for which a Jew could seek legal redress.

But Jesus said, “Turn and offer him the left cheek as well!” “And when you are impressed into the service of one of the occupying Roman soldiers and forced to carry his gear one mile,” he said, “go with him two miles.” Yes, that’s the original context of “going the extra mile.”

It goes against the grain, it galls us.

So Jesus here rejects Zealotry, Jewish revolutionism against the Roman occupation, and no doubt many early followers who hoped that as the Messiah he’d lead a revolt despised him for it.

Some of his twelve chosen disciples were Zealots, and it is not impossible that Judas, who betrayed him, was a man with a very keen sense of social justice who simply ran out of patience with Jesus for not even advocating, let alone actually taking, serious concrete political action against injustice.

That's how Judas was presented in "Jesus Christ, Superstar", and it may, in fact, be so – although we cannot really know for sure because the gospel writers weren't overly concerned with his side of the story!

Mahatma Gandhi cited Jesus' teaching here in support of his idea, and decades-long practice, of non-violent resistance to British rule in India. Although he was a Hindu, he knew Jesus' teaching and saw it as pointing to God's way. But that didn't stop him from using it as a political tool. His idea was that non-violent resistance would provoke repeated violent crackdowns – in full view of the press – which would eventually shame the British into granting independence. And for that purpose, of course, it worked.

But in a context where there was much more hatred and distrust between native Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities than there was toward the British on the part of any of them, Gandhi urged non-violent response to atrocities committed by members of one of these communities against those of another. Gandhi hoped thereby to avoid the partitioning of Muslim areas of India as Pakistan – in that, of course, he was not successful.

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Indian Muslim leader who became the founder of Pakistan, also initially hoped to avoid partition, but told Gandhi that unfortunately, most of the Hindus were not like him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew of Gandhi's non-violent resistance through his acquaintance with Gandhi's English friend Rev. C. F. Andrews, and was interested in its potential for anti-Nazi resistance in Germany. Gandhi told Andrews to tell Bonhoeffer that he would be welcome at Gandhi's Ashram, but also to tell him that non-violent resistance would never work with the Nazis.

Gandhi explained that the British by their actions in India were contradicting their own values, and that non-violent resistance would expose this dark side to them without giving them the slightest pretext of an excuse for it. There are echoes here of Paul's saying in Romans 12 (quoting Proverbs 25) that by not returning evil for evil, Christians heap burning coals upon their enemies' heads.

But the Nazis, in contrast, knew exactly what they were about and were deliberately and systematically pursuing it, and would, therefore, simply crush all resistance brutally and without remorse, indeed, with pleasure, as though they were doing right. I suppose that in the eyes of the Teutonic pagan god they had made in their own image, they were.

So to stop the Nazis, Gandhi said, the German resistance would, sadly, have to use directed violence against them. Which the German resistance eventually did – which is why its attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944 has always been and remains controversial as proper Christian action.

Some of the leading lights in German Protestantism, like Martin Niemoeller and Hanns Lilje, opposed Bonhoeffer's actions when they learned of them after the war. A friend of mine once argued to me that Bonhoeffer abandoned non-violence to become a Zealot! He had a point – although Bonhoeffer, only too well aware of that argument, saw the situation as the German resistance, in love for Germany and the whole world, embracing in Radical Obedience Jesus' point-of-death forsakenness by God as its very own.

In this way, they abandoned any attempt at self-justification and threw themselves wholly upon the grace and mercy of God. I know that one of the German generals in particular, Henning von Tresckow, went to his death utterly convinced of this grounding of their action in Jesus' death.

But my friend replied that he'd rather take his stand on Jesus' literal word as reported in scripture than on this sort of theological construction. And I think my friend replaces Radical Obedience to the living Christ now with obedience to Jesus' literal word as a Law regardless of the situation.

So there you have it, and sometimes you have to agree to disagree.

Martin Luther King's embrace of non-violent resistance for black liberation in the United States in the 1950's and 60's has many parallels to Gandhi's earlier work in India. Except that King was a Christian, a Baptist preacher, who was personally committed to Jesus' teaching not primarily for pragmatic reasons but simply because it was Jesus' teaching.

His pursuit of non-violence, his rejection of racial division, and his refusal to hate, all of which set him apart from the likes of Malcolm X or H. Rap Brown came directly from his commitment to God in Jesus Christ. For him, the Son of God set forth God's way – and he was therefore determined to pursue its political implications for black Americans.

But in his "I have a dream" speech, we see his vision not only of racial *equality* but of racial *unity*, which was rooted in his even larger vision of the unity of the children of God. Now as a political program, this has largely succeeded.

Things are so much different now from what they were in the Sixties, and King is the main reason for it, even if the eradication of racism is still a work in progress. I mean, who could have imagined, on the day of his assassination in 1968, which I remember vividly, that in 40 years a black man would be elected President of the United States!

But for King it was so much more than a political program, and I don't think even primarily a political program. There was always in his work the strong element that the oppressors need to stop it, not just for the sake of the oppressed but, in the sight of God, even more for their own sake, hand in hand with God's uncompromising demand for justice for God's own people.

Which leads us to the last, and most difficult, of Jesus' antitheses. "You have heard that they were told, 'Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!" We all choke on this one, don't we? It sounds so foolish.

We have seen, though, that this element was present in both Gandhi and King, and it even helped to make their political action effective. Both of them, in their ways, followed Jesus through obedience to his word all the way to the cross, for the sake of other people, and much good came from it.

"Make no mistake," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "if any of you fancy yourselves wise – by the standards of this passing age, that is – you must become fools to gain true wisdom."

The German resisters asked the difficult question whether, in their situation, scrupulous obedience to Jesus' literal word of non-violence as a law would really be to shun him. If they tried to stand on high ground and so to prove themselves "good" and to justify themselves by scrupulously obeying his literal word, as their nation and indeed all of western civilization went down to ruin, would that really amount to shunning him in the God-forsakenness of his death in love for all the world? He condescended to embrace completely for himself the God-forsakenness of sinful humanity.

For Jesus, this is what being the Son of God was all about, and he could not be the Son of God apart from this. Would obeying his literal word as a law, to prove themselves good by that standard and justify themselves, amount to doing the one thing he could never have done as the Son of God? Would that not be a sham goodness and a sham justification?

So they accompanied him to the utter disgrace of the cross between two thieves outside the city wall, recognizing that they were as big fools as he was and hoping they were a fraction as wise. So I think Jesus was not so much setting down a law of non-violence as insisting that all who would follow him set themselves – their will, their action, their resources – *for others' good, not for their detriment*.

That is almost always a mandate for non-violence, but non-violence as a law unto itself can sometimes be a rejection of Jesus' embrace of the guilt of the world.

So the real motivation for his disciples in not returning evil for evil, for not taking up violence, is not so much that they should be called "good" or get something done, but that they should be children of their Father in heaven, who, after all, makes sun shine and rain fall on evil and good alike, who wills good for all.

Take up, Jesus says, the attitude of your Father in heaven toward every person you encounter, *your enemies as well as your friends!* And then work out what that means, in Radical Obedience to God in Christ, and in the freedom of the Spirit. For only in this way do you show yourselves to be God's children, who do as they see their Father doing!

Everybody greets their friends in the marketplace, and everybody loves those who love them – if *that's* all you do, in just exactly what way are you salt and light?

For this great task and holy calling, we have Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who goes before us as the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city on a hill.

And in Him, we really are, with disciples before us, with Gandhi and King, with Bonhoeffer and von Tresckow, also salt and light, and that city – not only for those who are ostensibly on our side, but even for those who are against us.

He calls us to take up, to appropriate in ourselves, what he has made us, our true life, what we really are – children of our Father in heaven, who sends sun and rain to the evil and the good alike.

Amen.