

## **TURN THE OTHER CHEEK?**

**Matthew 5:38-48**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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This morning our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount continues with Jesus again challenging us to follow a lifestyle in sync with the Kingdom of God.

“You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (Matthew 5:38-41)

This, I think, is one of Jesus’ more controversial and some would argue impractical teachings. Are we supposed to allow the bullies of the world run roughshod over the rest of us? Should we remain silent, stand by and do nothing if a bully beats up someone who can’t defend himself? What’s a Christian do?

In the movie *Witness*, Harrison Ford plays John Book a Philadelphia police detective hiding out in an Amish community. Though he dresses Amish he doesn’t necessarily behave Amish.

While riding in a buggy on a Lancaster County residential street our hero sees another buggy load of Amish being harassed by a trio of some redneck tourists showing off to their girlfriends. One brute takes an ice cream cone and smears it on the right then the left cheek of a young Amish farmer. You can tell by the look on his face he’s summoning all his spiritual strength to contain his anger and resist retaliation. Of course, this display of Christ-like behavior only eggs the bully on.

Harrison Ford’s character, ignoring his friend’s admonishment, “It’s not our way,” to retaliate slowly approaches the bully and single handedly beat the tar out of him and his friends while the Amish helplessly look on.

We admire the Amish commitment to the Sermon on the Mount; it’s commendable to turn the other cheek, but even the Apostle Paul hinted it’s not always practical when he exhorted in Romans, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” (Romans 12:18)

Here’s an imaginary but entirely plausible scenario I’ve often wondered about. Jesus unexpectedly shows up at his mother’s house in Nazareth only to find three Roman soldiers attacking her. What would Jesus do? Stand by and do nothing? Preach a sermon on love and nonviolence? Or would he summon the same anger that caused him to chase the moneylenders out of the temple with a whip and defend his mother’s life?

Ideally pacifism is preferable to violence and peace is better than war but what do you do when defenseless people are attacked by belligerent people?

The Christian justification for pacifism is as old as Christianity itself and Christian pacifists in every generation have made the strong case Jesus himself was a pacifist. Certainly the pagan gods of war are the antithesis of the Christian God of peace. That's precisely why the pacifist argue the Christian citizen's ultimate loyalty is to the Kingdom of God. This is the position that Quakers, the Amish and many Christians in all denominations have taken and it's a position that needs to be respected.

Of course, the Pacifist would be the first to admit there's a great risk in putting their beliefs into practice. Ideally the aggressor would be impressed and maybe even humbled by the courage of the pacifist's witness and stand down, but there's the greater likelihood the aggressor would simply be encouraged and have an easier time conquering and maybe even enslaving you because you refused to defend yourself and your way of life. Of course if your conqueror is a liberator whose aim is to extend your freedoms it's all to the good, but if not, that's when the pacifist has to live with the unintended consequences of his beliefs.

At the same time, those who adhere to what is called the Just War theory also have to live with the unintended consequences of their beliefs. Proponents of the "Just War" position, whose origins go back to St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, would readily agree with the pacifist that peace is better than war but would also argue allowing an aggressor nation to conquer and enslave neighboring nations with impunity gives credence to the axiom, "Evil prospers when good men do nothing."

If you know your history, you'll remember how the British and French in 1938 appeased Hitler at Munich to save the peace in Europe, but only delayed war by several months by giving into Hitler's demands, which made Hitler stronger and democracies weaker. The British and French applied the Sermon on the Mount to their diplomacy, but the consequences of their quest for peace were catastrophic.

But like the Pacifist's quest for peace, the advocates for the Just War also have to recognize the unintended consequences of their position. Maybe they regretfully go to war for the right reasons, fighting for justice and freedom, but in their quest to defend the weak and defeat the tyrant, innocent men, women and children always suffer and die

My point is, neither the Pacifist nor the supporter of the "Just War" can automatically claim the higher ground, because both positions are adherently flawed. Though the Pacifist has the best of intentions to keep the peace, evil will prosper when good men stand by and do nothing while supporters of the "Just War" theory must take responsibility for the human suffering it takes to fight for a "just cause."

My intention this morning isn't to side with either position. I'm simply pointing out there's no "one size fits all" solution. However, Jesus' teaching, "Be as wise as

serpents but as gentle as doves,” can instruct us individually whenever we find ourselves face to face with an aggressor who refuses to back down.

It’s important we understand, “But if any one strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also…” is actually a Middle Eastern idiom for being insulted. Jesus is really saying, “If someone insults you don’t retaliate.” The Amish farmer whose face was being smeared with ice cream proved himself to be a faithful witness to his faith in Christ as did his Amish relatives and friends who showed the same restraint and silently suffered with him.

But what do we make of Harrison Ford’s character’s reaction to the bullying? A case could be made if the bully didn’t go beyond insulting his victim Detective Book should have respected the Amish way of nonviolence and not interfered. However if the bully and his friends physically attacked the Amish farmer and his family, then a strong case could be made that Book, as an officer of the law, was obligated to come to their defense and if necessary, use force.

Most of my sermons attempt to lay out definitive guidelines for Christian faith and practice but this isn’t one of them, at least insofar as to whether or not to turn the other cheek, depending on the situation. However, as I was praying for guidance as I prepared for this sermon I suddenly remembered conversations I’ve had with the young men I visit at the Baltimore County Jail. Regularly the question comes up, “How am I supposed to turn the other cheek here in jail if an inmate is disrespecting me? I just can’t let him walk all over me because then I’ll get the reputation for being a wimp and I’ll get even more abuse!”

I believe the answer I give them applies to us as well.

First I tell them to remember Jesus because if there was ever a role model for staying cool under fire it’s Jesus. Jesus was a real man because he was both strong and compassionate and never intimidated by anybody. When the scribes and Pharisees got aggressive, far from becoming their doormat, Jesus responded by being assertive. He never backed down, he always stood his ground and always demonstrated it takes a strong man to turn the other cheek and that strength can only come from God through prayer.

The other thing I remind my young friends is if you’re really serious about following Jesus you can’t disregard his commandment to “love one another as I have loved you.” Of course it’s expected we love our family and friends, but how do we love someone who tries to hurt us? The short answer is never give into hate and retribution. At the least it means learning how to pray for your enemies, at the most it means at least try to make your enemy your friend.

I hope today’s sermon gets you thinking about the Christian response to aggressive people. “Turn the other cheek” seems like an impossible standard to live up to if someone is out to physically harm you, but it seems like common sense if someone is

only out to disrespect you. As we tell our children “sticks and stones may break our bones but names will never hurt me.”

On Good Friday they not only called Jesus names and insulted him, they broke his body and shed his blood. So next time you’re tempted to retaliate or “get even” remember Jesus and ask him for the grace to do likewise.

No one ever said following Jesus would be easy. Being Christ-like goes way beyond being nice. It takes courage and character and a whole lot of prayer. Yes it’s hard, but it’s not impossible. St. Paul wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Let’s hope and pray none of us will ever be victims of physical violence, but all of us have been or will be insulted or verbally abused at one time or another. When we are may God give us the grace we need to be a faithful witness to Christ and his gospel of peace so God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven?