Boundless Compassion Peace Presbyterian Church

Luke 6:27-38 After Epiphany

Elizabeth M. Deibert 24 February 2019

Last Sunday, preaching after two hours of sleep, I had the joy of announcing the birth of our granddaughter. Many of you have heard by now that her name is Fiona Cecilia, and that she is the most beautiful baby in all the world. We know she will have her moments in the future, but right now, her needs are simple – sleep, eat, diaper change, cuddle, repeat many times each day. We feel boundless compassion for this little one and all the challenges she and her parents will face in life. Everything gets more complicated as the years go by, doesn’t it? The simple command to love God, neighbor, and self is seen in today’s reading in all of its difficulties – what to do with enemies? What to do with those who oppress you, bully you? What does it mean to do to others as you would have them do to you? Hear the Gospel of Luke, a continuation of the Sermon on the Plain which we started last week with the blessing of the poor and troubled and the woes to the rich and powerful.

**Luke 6:27–38 (NRSV)**

**27**“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28**bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. **29**If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. **30**Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. **31**Do to others as you would have them do to you.

**32**“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **33**If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. **34**If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. **35**But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+6%3A27-38&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-25174a)] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. **36**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

**37**“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; **38**give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

“Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss Jesus’ teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. “Turn the other cheek” has come to imply a passive, doormatlike quality that has made the Christian way seem cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. “Resist not evil” seems to break the back of all opposition to evil and to counsel submission.”

So says Walter Wink, who has written about Jesus’ third way, a way of resisting evil, not either caving in to it, nor living like it. “ Jesus is not telling us to submit to evil, but to refuse to oppose it on its own terms. We are not to let the opponent dictate the methods of our opposition. He is urging us to transcend both passivity and violence by finding a third way, one that is at once assertive and yet nonviolent. The correct translation would be the one still preserved in the earliest renditions of this saying found in the New Testament epistles: "Do not repay evil for evil" (Rom. 12:17; 1 Thes. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9)

So to understand the striking on the cheek issue, you need to know that in the first century, a superior would use the backside of the hand to strike someone beneath him, and a fist against an equal. So when Jesus says, turn the cheek, he is likely saying that these Jews oppressed by Roman soldiers should not take hits as an inferior, but turn the cheek so that the right-hander must fight them like an equal. Turning the cheek is to say, “I am a valuable person. You will not treat me like scum.”

There is a similar issue with the coat and shirt. This assumes that a powerful person is abusing a less powerful one. In first century times, the shame was in seeing or causing someone else’s nakedness, not in being naked. So the oppressor would be shamed, if he was standing in public holding the undergarments of someone beneath him. Thus, if they take your coat, give them your shirt.

As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating." Martin Luther King, Jr, helped those in the Civil Rights movement to live this out. It is just not right to teach that Jesus wants us to be clobbered over and over again.

How often that interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children, and to slaves and other victims of oppression. To such victims as these, Jesus surely advises, "Stand up for yourselves, wisely, creatively defy those who would try to control you by harm, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new, third way that is neither cowardly nor violent.” Do not be pulled into evil by evil.

So that’s where it gets difficult – how to find the third way, the compassionate way. When it comes to loving enemies, Joyce Rupp in her wonderful book *Boundless Compassion*, reminds us that behind every scar is a story. She reminds us that there is a way to respond mindfully, nonviolently so that we move from hostility to hospitality. The Stephen Minister group invites you to read this book with us and join us on the second Thursdays of each month to discuss a brief part of it. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson tells the story of a Native American grandmother who was asked by a young one how she became such a wise and respected elder, and she says that there are two wolves fighting in her, the wolf of love and the wolf of hate. She goes on to explain that it all depends on which wolf you feed every day, as to which one is stronger. Which wolf are we feeding?

So with Jesus’ way of compassion, we are always looking for a creative alternative to violence as we assert our own dignity and that of others, as we break the cycle of humiliation and expose the injustice of the system. We are willing to suffer in doing what is right, and we refuse to abide by rules of an order that dehumanizes anyone. Jesus does not advocate armed revolutions but does advocate social change. Our Savior is a man who died loving his enemies. So we are call to feed the loving wolf and to disarm the angry, hateful wolf in ourselves and others. The world will not change overnight but little-by-little we will make a difference. As Dr King said, “Love is the only thing that can turn an enemy into a friend.”

I hope when our little Fiona grows up, there will be fewer neglected, refugee, and war- battered children in the world. I hope there will less bullying in schools and fewer young adults who turn to drugs and violence because they cannot see the boundless compassion of God.

I hope when Fiona grows up that multiculturalism will be embraced by all people and #metoo will be in history books not in the local news. I hope when Fiona grows up she will visit a church named Peace, where her birth was celebrated, and she will find a congregation living out the boundless compassion of Christ in astounding ways that have shaped the community all around us.