

Show the Strength of Our Hearts

Luke 6:27–38

Down the street at the taekwondo studio, all the students dutifully recite, “Use taekwondo responsibly to never harm others.” Yet, as they progress through the ranks, they also learn methods of self-defense: blocks, punches, and kicks. I’ve noticed that their techniques often end with a foot or fist to the would-be attacker’s groin! And I’m glad for my daughter to learn this. The world can be a scary place.

So, I wish to be clear that the phrase “turn the other cheek” should never be understood as forcing a victim, such as one of domestic abuse, to stay in a situation. What, then, does such a phrase mean?

We are meeting this afternoon with the congregation of Mount Zion, a partnership that we’ve enjoyed for several years now. I have learned a tremendous amount from their wise elders. This morning’s Gospel reading recalls the instructions that they gave to their children and grandchildren about driving lessons. This instruction was not just about the rules of the road or safety techniques, like checking your blind spot; it specifically addressed “driving while Black,” especially if you are pulled over by a police officer. Be sure to keep your hands in view at all times, preferably on the steering wheel. Be polite. Say, “Yes, sir” and “No, sir.” Above all else, remain calm. Be respectful to the point of being deferential.

True enough, we should all treat police officers with respect. However, the risks are greater for people of color. They are more often victims of violence. The elders at Mount Zion were clear: being deferential could save a life.

The original audience of Jesus would have related. They lived under the occupation of the Roman Empire, a police state over their homeland. In our culture, the phrases “go the extra mile” and “give the shirt off your back” are positive because they refer to voluntary actions of generosity. Jesus’ words stemmed from the fact that a Roman soldier could compel someone to carry his equipment, seize their belongings, or physically abuse them without any legal consequence. The Roman soldier could slap you around and brutally punish or kill anyone who resisted.

So, part of what’s going on here is deference. Yet, there’s something else, too—something that I’ll call *defiance*.

We tend to think of injunctions, like “turn the other cheek,” as addressed to individuals like us, but Jesus came down from the mountain into a low-lying area or plain to address a large number of people. And not only that, he spoke to a marginalized assembly—a crowd of the poor, sick, and oppressed who had gathered before him (Luke 6:17–18). What message might he have had for that kind of audience?

For insight, I turn to the *First Nations Version* of the Bible. Indigenous Native American scholars of the New Testament wrote this translation in light of their worldview, which is actually far more similar to people of the ancient Middle East than much of Western Christianity today. I note that, in this version, “turn the other cheek” becomes “when you are struck on one side of the face, *show the strength of your heart* and turn the other also” (Luke 6:29).

This emphasis on “the strength of your heart” reflects the intention of Jesus to empower the oppressed to advocate for themselves in terms of nonviolent resistance. I’m talking about the defiance of unjust laws.

Mahatma Gandhi understood this. The revolutionary leader of India recognized the principles of nonviolent resistance in Jesus’ teachings. He employed these tactics to protest the brutal occupation of the British Empire, a country (by the way) that was officially Christian. No wonder Gandhi said, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians.”

Gandhi had a great admirer in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who also understood Jesus’ teachings as a collective call to the oppressed for nonviolent resistance. King said, “Christ showed us the way. Gandhi showed us that it could work.”

What Gandhi and King understood is that, while violent forces claimed absolute authority, their power actually relied on the cooperation of the general public. Swaying public opinion could lead to the overthrow of unjust rulers and laws. This swaying was achieved by shining light on the brutality—British soldiers attacking unarmed Indian peasants, police turning fire hoses and dogs on citizens, even children.

The effectiveness of nonviolent resistance, however, occurs with sacrifice. This is the unavoidable truth of the way of the cross.

Nonviolent resistance also happens over time. Therefore, it requires faith. As King put it, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Who am I to quibble with Dr. King? However, even that statement can be deceptive; we understand that our encounter with justice is often not a linear path, but rather a sequence of ups and downs, even regression.

So, for inspiration, I recall once again the wise elders of Mount Zion who are fond of quoting the King James: “Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season, we shall reap, if we faint not (Galatians 6:9).”

This is a challenging sermon, for I believe that is Jesus’ message. But I don’t wish to leave us only with challenge.

Even while we wait, I believe there is grace, for joy is found in trials and sufferings. “Your reward will be great,” promised Jesus, “for you will be children of the Most High (Luke 6:35).” I don’t think this statement refers to salvation, for eternal life comes by grace alone; rather, this reward is finding common community with diverse people, even those we once considered our enemies.

Big ideas exist in small stories. Last week, a group of volunteers from Chapel in the Pines trained at the Youth Development Center so that they can volunteer with juveniles.

I was thinking of them as I read about a group of Catholic nuns in Texas. These women visit inmates on death row. Both groups of women were astonished to discover how much they had in common. Neither group is considered beautiful by society’s standards. Both wear the same clothes, day in and day out. And both live in cells. The nuns discovered that, like them, many of the inmates devoted a corner of their cells to private prayer. The sisters were so impressed that they have begun the process of initiating certain inmates into their religious order.

Show your heart's strength and seek community with others, even those who seem unlikely. Turning the other cheek is both an act of deference and defiance; it may even be an act of vulnerability that opens us to discover love in unexpected places. As Brittany, one inmate on death row, said of the experience with the nuns, “We opened our arms, and they opened their arms, and we embraced.”

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