

A Different Revolution
Psalm 33:1-11, Luke 6:27-38
February 24, 2019
First Presbyterian Church

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do 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. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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 he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be 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; ³⁸give, 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.”

Sermon

It is entirely possible
that at the end of last week’s Gospel reading,
one might accuse Jesus of being a “revolutionary”.
He said to the crowd, “Blessed are you who
are poor, hungry, sorrowful, and despised,”
and then he followed with, “Woe to you who
are rich, are well-fed, are happy, and well-regarded.”
Little doubt the poor folks in the crowd that day
heard this as very good news.
It sounded like something was about to go down
and Jesus was about to do something
and folks were about to get what was coming to them –
only what the rich got and what the poor got
would be two different things.
And you can imagine how to some
these might sound like revolutionary words...
and how they might have been inspired
to join up and do what they could to hasten things along.

They had been at the bottom so long,
 you can see them picking up sticks and rocks off the ground...
 pulling swords out of their sheaths.
At any moment Jesus could announce the revolution
 and when he did they'd be ready to rush the city...
 pull the high and mighty off their thrones...
 and give the lowly poor what was coming to them.
"C'mon say it, Jesus.
 Just say the word and the revolution will begin."
And as it happened he did speak...
 "But I tell you who hear me..."
 and they hear him all right.
Tensed and ready... ears cocked toward the sound of his voice.
 Swords raised... sticks held high...
 stones in hand... ready for revolution.
"Just say the word, Jesus. Just say the word."
 And Jesus said, "Love your enemies!"
And there they go, charging off toward the city...
 whooping and yelling and swinging their weapons...
 and then, suddenly, stopping in their tracks.
 "What did he say?"
They trudge back to where the Lord is standing –
 dragging the tips of their swords in the dust...
 their clubs hanging by their sides...
 stones held loosely in their hands.
"Excuse me," one of them asks. "But what did you say?"
 "Love your enemies," Jesus repeats.
 "Do good to those who hate you.
 Bless those who curse you.
 Pray for those who abuse you."
And standing there, scratching their heads,
 one of them asks, "Could you be a little more specific?"
"Certainly," Jesus replies.
 "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.
 Give to anyone who begs from you;
 and if anyone takes away your goods
 don't ask for them back.
In other words, "Do unto others
 as you would have them do unto you."¹

¹ From a sermon "A Radical Compassionism" by Jim Somerville, A Sermon for Every Sunday, February 24, 2019.

What strange kind of revolution is this?

Certainly not the kind some were hoping for/wanting.

It is likely he was speaking to the victims that day...

rather than victimizers that day...

to those who were oppressed

rather than their oppressors.

Which made Jesus' words

about turning the other cheek

and giving up your coat AND your shirt

seem all the more demeaning.

Like what some very misguided pastors do

when they tell a battered wife to stay with her husband

because she made a vow before God...

like what other very misguided pastors do

when they tell the poor they are poor

because of their sin

or because it is the will of God

and they just need endure their misery in this life

because something better is coming after they die.

But New Testament scholar, Walter Wink,

has helped us see these words differently...

this is not Jesus calling victims to shut up and take it...

the Lord is not calling those who are oppressed

to just roll over and play dead!²

Strange as it may seem to us,

Wink hears in Jesus' words

a creative form of non-violent resistance to oppression...

which is intended to start a revolution –

just of another kind.

Now to see it this way

we have to know something about the culture

in which Jesus lived.

You'll have to pardon me,

but in first-century Palestine, a person's left hand

was used for what we might call "bathroom" functions.

I know it's not pleasant to think about,

but it meant that you'd never strike a person

with your left hand.

If you considered yourself superior to someone,

you would strike them with your right hand...

² See "Simple, But Not So Simple," a sermon by Barbara K. Lundblad, preached February 18, 2001 on Day1.org.

more specifically with the back of your right hand -
NEVER would you use the palm of your hand
because that would mean
you considered them your equal.

So you see the picture Jesus is painting here.

If an oppressor strikes you on the cheek,
it'll most likely be with the back of his hand...
a sign that you are not his equal.

If then you turn your face to offer the other cheek,
you force them to see you as an equal...
for the only way he can strike you again
is with his open palm.

Jesus wants us to see an almost comical situation here.

The oppressor's hand begins to swing a second blow
but is caught in mid-air
because he doesn't want to treat you as an equal
by hitting you with open palm.

The same kind of resistance

comes in giving up your shirt
when your oppressor asks for your coat.

Now this wasn't like giving an old coat to the winter coat drive.

Jesus is talking about something completely different here.

Most likely someone would ask for your coat
in repayment of a debt.

You owe your oppressor something
and since you have no land or money,
he asks for your very coat.

Now, in that day there were clear restrictions
regarding the repayment of debts.

One of them was that you could not leave a debtor naked at sundown,
no matter what he or she owed.

It simply was not to be done.

So Jesus sets up another strategy of resistance.

If they ask for your coat, give them your shirt too...
because there you'll be standing half-naked;
and they'll be forced
to deal with this new reality you've set up.

"No, no! No, no!" they say,

"I don't want your shirt. Put it back on!"

And who knows? Maybe they'll be so disarmed
that they'll return your coat as well.

You see, Jesus is not telling people to stay victims
but to find new ways of resisting evil.

"Love your enemies," Jesus said,
 "do good to those who hate you."
This is the ethic that moved Martin Luther King, Jr.,
 to kneel down with many brothers and sisters
 before water hoses and snarling police dogs.
Many people thought he was crazy.
 "Only violence can fight violence," they told him.
But the authorities and the oppressors
 didn't know what to do with this kind of resistance.
They knew the power of violence
 to keep victims in their place...
 but this was something they knew nothing about:
 victims who refused to be victims,
 victims who refused to meet violence with violence,
 victims who claimed their place as equals
 and reshaped the battle completely.
"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you," Jesus said.
 And then he goes on,
 But don't be too impressed with yourself
 for being good to your friends.
 Anybody can do that.
"If you love those who love you,
 what credit is that to you?
 For even sinners love those who love them.
If you do good to those who do good to you,
 what credit is that to you?
 For even sinners do the same.
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."
Just when we have the Golden Rule memorized and figured out,
 Jesus reminds us that it's far deeper
 than how we treat our friends.
 It's far deeper than what we hope to receive.
 It's even different than treating others
 the way we hope to be treated.
Jesus comes back again and again
 to the place where he began:
 "But love your enemies, do good, and lend,
 expecting nothing in return."
 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
A revolution to be sure, but of a very different sort.

This week I read an article about Matthew Shepherd's mother.

Do you remember Matthew? We need to...
Twenty years ago he was brutally beaten for being gay...
 beaten because a man in a bar
 though he had made a pass at him.
The man felt foolish and unmanly
 and so he got a friend to help him
 put the young college student in his place.
The two of them beat Matthew nearly to death...
 they then tied him to a fence on a country road
 and left him alone in the freezing night.
By the time someone found him the next morning
 and got him to the hospital,
 there was no way to save him.
Matthew Shepherd died
 as hundreds stood in candlelight vigil outside the hospital.
The two men who killed Matthew
 were arrested, tried, and convicted
 of the brutal hate crime.
Proved guilty of first-degree murder,
 they deserved the death penalty in the state of Wyoming.
But Matthew's mother came before the judge.
 She asked the judge to spare the lives of these guilty men.
Who can understand what she had gone through
 in the agonizing months leading up to the trial?
What mother could sleep
 with images of her beloved son tied to a fence,
 beaten and alone through the cold night?
What sort of people could do this to another human being?
"Love your enemies," Jesus said,
 "do good to those who hate you."
Matthew's mother did this –
 Her own life was shaped by a gospel deeper than hatred,
 stronger than revenge.
Truth is I don't know that I could do what she did.
 But I hold her in my heart
 as one of the leaders as a leader of another kind of revolution
 whose power is the gospel...
 whose weapon is love...
 love that can change the world.³

³ Lundblad again.