

Take a Stand

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, February 20th, 2011

Leviticus 19:1, 2; 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. . . You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. . . .'"

Everyone it seems can quote the Scriptures where it says, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. . . a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. . . a fracture for a fracture," especially if you are the one who has sustained the injury. We call it justice. Some receive their living making sure justice happens. And it seems everyone can quote Jesus when he says, "turn the other cheek. . . go the second mile," especially if you happen to be the one who has rapped somebody else on the head or forced the little guy to carry your stinking backpack. Some call it mercy. And some of us receive our living making sure mercy happens. But it seems we become very forgetful when Jesus says things like, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and don't refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . Be perfect (mature or complete), therefore, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

You know, we can be so adept with the Bible when we think it will work for us. We can be so ignorant of the Bible when we think it will not do us any good. I call it the "quarry method." You go to the Bible, dig out a chunk of Scripture from its context, and use it for your own purposes. Remember, even Satan can quote Scripture forwards, backwards and sideways when he meets Jesus in the wilderness of temptation.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, don't resist one who is evil. If anyone *backhands* you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well. If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his backpack one mile, carry it two."

Now, you might be thinking that these are some of the most misused, misunderstood, misquoted passages in the entire Bible. I think you would be right. Some have concluded that here, among the many teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, is the source of what we used to call in seminary "doormat theology": Just lie down and take it. Roll over and play dead. Let them walk all over you—like a doormat. Give up all concern for your own well-being and any sense of justice for yourself. If they rap you on one cheek, turn the other and let them batter you there too.

I don't mind saying that this is not good advice for some people, especially women and children living in abusive, battering relationships. This is not what Jesus was talking about. This is not good advice for a father or mother attempting to defend one's home against assault on family and theft of property. This is not good advice for an individual exercising self-defense. And this not good advice for governments which bear the responsibility for defending nations. Besides, the failure to resist "one who is evil," that is, non-resistance to a hostile attack, can lead to even more serious violence and abuse. When Martin Luther speaks of "the first use of the law," he is talking about its function to restrain evil and to give some semblance of order to society. Surely Jesus could not have meant living with abuse, or refusing to defend one's self and others, especially the weak and vulnerable, or governments failing to restrain evil at every level.

To begin with, Jesus himself resisted evil—engaged in combat with evil—with his entire being. There is not a single instance in which Jesus backs down from evil when he encounters it: casting out unclean spirits, healing the sick, driving out demons, fiercely debating his adversaries, raising the dead, cleansing the temple, enduring suffering and death by crucifixion. Then, "Don't resist one who is evil?"

As some have pointed out, the problem may be right there with the word "resist." "Resist" is not so much a *mistranslation* of the Greek verb so much as it is an *undertranslation*. The first part of the word means "against." The second part of the word means "to stand." Put these together and the word is rendered much more strongly as "to stand against," particularly, in the Old Testament, as a technical term for warfare, involving two armies marching up against each other and the battle begins. We call this "taking a stand."

Ephesians says, ". . . Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to *withstand* in that evil day and having done all to *stand firm*." "Wage the *good* warfare," the First Letter to Timothy urges us, "fight the *good* fight." "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to *withstand* (*stand against*) or contradict," Jesus promises. All of this suggests that we are not to be doormats.

Jesus is indicating that we *should not* resist evil on its own terms. Don't let your opponent dictate the terms of

your opposition. Don't become that which you oppose. Paul says, in an early version of this, "Do not return evil for evil." "When Jesus was abused, he did not return abuse," First Peter reminds us, "when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the One who judges justly."

Jesus gives three examples of what he means by not returning evil for evil. (Here I am indebted to Walter Wink, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary, for the fine social-historical study he has provided on this text in his volume entitled, *Engaging the Powers*, pages 175-84.)

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." If I were to strike you on the face with my right fist the blow would land on your left cheek. But Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek . . ." I could hit you on the right cheek, but only if I used a left hook, but this would be impossible in Jewish society of Jesus' day because the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. You could not even gesture with your left hand, let alone strike someone. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of my hand. Backhanding someone is not intended to injure but to symbolize putting you back in your place by someone who is in a position of power or superiority. In antiquity, the back of the hand was given by a master to a slave, a husband to a wife, a man to a woman, a parent to a child, a Roman to a Jew. Jesus is saying in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your place which is inferior, turn your other cheek." If you turn your head to the right, I can no longer backhand you because your nose is in the way. By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, the one in power, "I refuse to be humiliated by you. I am a human being. I am a child of God. You cannot put me down even if you kill me." This is taking a stand.

"If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well."

If a person was trying to get a loan in those days, they would use animals or land as collateral, but the very poorest of the poor, according to Exodus 22 and Deuteronomy 24, could pawn their outer garment which was the long robe that they used at night as a blanket and as an overcoat by day. The creditor had to return this garment at sundown every evening but could come get it every morning in order to harass the debtor into repayment. Jesus is talking to people who know very well they are going to be dragged into court because they can't pay their debts. They also know that the law is on the side of the rich, and that they are never going to win a case. So, Jesus says to them, "Okay, when your creditor sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well," which meant taking off the only stitch of clothing you had on and standing in court without clothes. The shame of nakedness in Israel was not on the person who was naked, but on the person who looked upon their nakedness. So, the creditor is put in the position of being shamed by the nakedness of the debtor. And it will be a long in that village before any creditor, fearing such shame, takes any similar case to court. This is taking a stand.

Finally, "If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two."

These packs weighed about 75-80 pounds, not counting weapons. Roman military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force him to carry the pack, but restricted this to only one mile—no more. If the civilian were forced to carry the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in violation of military code and could be disciplined. So Jesus says, "The next time a soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Then, when you come to the one mile marker, just keep on going." The soldier won't know what's happening. If his centurion finds out about this, the soldier is in big trouble because a little Jewish peasant "went the second mile." This is taking a stand—on one's own terms.

Jesus is calling on us to resist, but to resist in a way that is neither violent toward the other person nor oneself. He is calling us to take a stand, to take a stand against evil, but the nature of this stand is not to be determined by evil. His new rule of life and freedom is breaking into the old kingdom of sin and death.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . Be perfect (mature or complete), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'"