

Breaking Chains

Mother Imelda and I were commiserating the other day about how tough the last few weeks of gospel lessons have been to preach on.

After all, no one wants to stand up here and cause offense.

And yet, the words from Jesus these last few weeks, and especially when Jesus gets to the crux of the matter today, seem bound and determined to offend.

After all, the darling of the right wing, Ayn Rand has this to say about the Sermon on the Mount:

“If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject.”

Not to be out done, the darling of the left, Karl Marx, weighs in as well, declaring that “the social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness.”

So what about the heart of our faith that Jesus declares today, by insisting that we love our enemy, that we turn the other cheek to those who strike us, that we walk the extra mile with those who impose their will upon us, that we be kind to those who are not kind to us?

Of course none of this makes any sense unless it is tied tightly to the one who commands these tasks.

Disconnected from Jesus, we have only a recipe for masochism, and it is true that over the years abusive spouses, slave masters, unjust employers and others have tried to twist what Jesus is saying into some kind of recipe for the one being abused to just grin and bear it.

That's not where Jesus is coming from, and frankly, if you're in an abusive relationship, whether at home or on the job or elsewhere, get out: do not pass go, do not collect \$200, just get out.

It's not masochism that Jesus is endorsing.

Instead, he is endorsing a new way to face conflict, and in the process, he is endorsing a new way to face ourselves.

This new way is rooted in a profound faith in, of all things, our God-given humanity.

By neither fighting nor fleeing in the face of conflict, but rather enduring, there is a chance of touching something deep within the aggressor that just might change her, that just might let out some of the pus that fuels his righteous rage.

Maybe you heard this story about Gandhi, who is walking down a dangerous road with an Anglican priest.

Some young toughs are coming in the opposite direction and the priest begins to get nervous.

"Maybe we should turn around."

But Gandhi says:

"Doesn't the New Testament say that 'if your enemy strikes you on the right cheek offer him the left'?"

The priest replies: "I think maybe the phrase is used, uh, metaphorically..... I really don't think..."

But Gandhi cuts him off:

"I'm not so sure."

I have thought about it a great deal, and I suspect he meant you must show courage, be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show that you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside.

And when you do that it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred for you decrease and his respect increase.

I think Christ grasped that, and I have seen it work.”

Through courageous acts of non-violent resistance, India won her freedom.

We saw it at work in the deep south during the civil rights movement, when fire hoses were turned on children, women and men, when snarling German Shepherds’ vicious teeth were turned on innocents; and the response was not to return blow for blow, but to endure — and a nation began to change.

A nun just this week was sentenced to 3 years in federal prison because she broke into a nuclear bomb facility.

According to news reports, the 83 year old nun and other protesters splattered human blood on the wall of a \$548 million storage bunker containing much of the nation’s bomb-grade uranium, spray painted Biblical verses of peace, and defaced the exterior of the complex with a household hammer.

The nun asked the judge not to have leniency on her, saying:

“To remain in prison for the rest of my life would be the greatest gift you could give me.”

Why?

Perhaps because she is offering the balance of her life as a witness to the power of non-violent resistance to change how we think, to change who we are.

Jesus homes in on our wider social lives.

Jesus homes in on our private lives as well.

Jesus knows full well that real transformation, real metanoia, real turning around, is born only in the painful process of learning to love my enemies, because, in the immortal words of the cartoon character Pogo, "we have met the enemy, and he is us."

So often, the folks who really get to me are very much like me, or at least very much like those aspects of myself that I can't stand.

So it's no surprise that when Jesus says "love your enemy," he's not just making a suggestion, he's issuing a command.

The fact of the matter is you've got to love your enemy in order to grow up, in order to become mature; because "what we don't like about ourselves is our inner enemy, and so we need to learn to love and forgive that enemy, too.

Embarking on the journey to our insides, to our painful pasts, to our lingering wounds, that journey takes great humility and great compassion and great courage; but if we learn to forgive the enemy who lives inside of us, we will be prepared for the enemy who lives out there." R. Rohr, paraphrased.

But Jesus doesn't call it quits with enemies.

He's after even more; like how we define ourselves and with whom we choose to hang out.

When we get right down to it, it's pretty clear that we are often most comfortable with our own kind, with our own class of people, with those of our own race, or ethnicity, or financial status or education.

Likes tend to be attracted to likes.

We are, as a people, very good at dividing friend from foe, or at least friend from stranger.

It's no small irony that churches are often the likeliest place in the world to find one kind of folk, a group of likes coming together with likes.

But here comes Jesus.

"If you love those who love you, so what?"

If you greet only your brothers or sisters, so what?"

And so we've gotten good at watering down the Sermon on the Mount, which has been the gospel lesson for each of the last three Sundays.

Some will say all this loving of enemies and welcoming everyone and enduring violence are very nice suggestions, sweet really, but as a recipe for daily life: forgetaboutit!

Others will say "Jesus is only talking about life back then, not the complicated, multinational circus that we live in, full of violence and threats of destruction, by so-called Muslims and a more aggressive Russia!"

And still others will insist that "Jesus means we should try our best privately to do this stuff, in our hearts, but it has no bearing on our community or our nation."

All of which is very well and good, rational, very sensible and extremely logical!

The only problem is, Jesus disagrees.

It seems that Jesus in fact means exactly what he says to us today.

Go back and read it again, and it's hard to imagine he's just posturing, especially since Jesus turns the other cheek, forgives his enemies, and welcomes the smelly and the sinner.

Maybe we could get away with treating the Sermon on the Mount like a Hallmark card, if only Jesus lived in some pie in the sky world: but he didn't.

He and his people lived with the boot of Roman occupation placed firmly, every day, on the neck of Israel.

The Jewish people were beaten down, oppressed, taxed mercilessly, humiliated.

To think that somehow Jesus' words went down easier then than now is to have it completely wrong.

The ache in the gut of being victimized, violated and vanquished was a daily routine, and yet, into that very environment, Jesus says:

"There is another way."

There is "The Way," there is "My Way."

When you are a guest, take the lowest seat; since she who humbles herself shall be exalted."

Or if you want in to the Kingdom of God, become like this child; and, by the way, be sure to wash each others feet; and, oh, one other thing, if you want to live, get ready to die.

Jesus was not and is not about being effective or sensible as we understand those things.

He was not and is not about prosperity or efficient living.

Jesus, God incarnate, God with us, is the very being and substance of God, demonstrating who God is, how God behaves, what God is like.

This God, who sends rain on both saints and crooks; who makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust; God's ways are not like our ways.

God is peace.

God is compassion.

God is mercy.

God is rest.

And at the heart of it all, God knows us to our core.

At our core, he knows that we are each of us good and bad.

We are each of us righteous and unrighteous.

The line to be drawn between the just and the unjust cuts not through this nation or that ethnic group, this religion or that country; rather, that line cuts right through me, right through you, through our country and the enemy's country, through our faith, and the enemy's faith.

As Gibran put it, "If you would punish in the name of righteousness, and lay the axe against the evil tree, look to its roots, and you shall find the roots of the good and the bad, the fruitful and the fruitless all entwined together in the sacred heart of the earth."

A few years ago Colorado had one of its many mass shootings.

None of the churches in the area would give a burial service for the young man who caused so much senseless carnage.

Finally, a Lutheran pastor agreed to preside at the service at his church, and during the service, he spoke of God's love being strong enough even to forgive such senseless slaughter.

Not long after that service, the minister was fired by the outraged congregation.

In the hard sayings that he places before us today, Jesus invites us to step outside of the world as we think it is and to come to see the world as God intends it to be.

It is a world in which everything we have is not a result of just desserts, but God's generous gift, meant to be shared with anyone who asks, anyone who needs.

It's okay to start with baby steps.

Like the meals we give each Sunday from our food pantry, like learning to live in community with so many who are so different.

Each of these baby steps are a small loosening of our ever so tight grip of relying on our own resources, our own best thinking – letting go of all of that, and slowly learning to cling to our Father in heaven, who knows your name and mine; who will never let us go.

Today, Jesus teaches us about the very heart of God.

This God who loves the unlovable, who comes among us, suffering the worst we can dish out, who is raised, the first born from the dead, the promise of the life that awaits each and every one of us.

Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy, not because it is logical or reasonable (it is NONE of those!), but because that is how God loves.

You've heard the old saying "You become what you eat?"

Well, there's an even older saying:

"You become what you worship."

Today, in the starkest terms, Jesus invites us to worship, with our lives, in our daily encounters with one another, this strange God; and in the worshipping, he invites us all to bend ourselves so that we may look more and more like this odd God.

Not because that's how we would choose to do things, but because this is the way God is.

And as God's image bearers, it is the way we are meant to be.

Gene Peterson says it this way:

"You are kingdom subjects.

Now, live like it.

Live out your God-created identity."

Or as St. Augustine tells his congregation as they, like we, gather for Holy Communion:

“Receive who you are.

Become what you receive.”

Something happens when we love our enemy, when we decline to follow our own best thinking, when we give, especially to the undeserving, to the dopes, to the ones who have only themselves to blame for their situation.

Something happens.

God happens.

May God happen, this day, to you.

+amen

