

“What?”

What? What was Jesus trying to communicate? What was he thinking? What did Jesus expect his followers, including us, to do? David Lose recognizes most people in the present would respond to what Jesus is reported to have said in the Gospel Lectionary Reading with astonishment! Lose analyzes peoples’ responses and writes, “I think a lot of us probably have one of two reactions to this passage and the (in)famous commands it contains. The first is simple, and a little sad: we’ve heard Jesus’ commands so often that they hardly register. *‘Turn the other cheek.’ Yeah – yawn – sure. ‘Love your enemies.’ Sounds nice – why not?* And out of our trained indifference we rarely think deeply about actually trying to follow them.”

Lose continuing to share his insights, says, “The second response takes Jesus’ words more seriously, but also assumes they’re somewhat out of reach. *‘Turn the other cheek.’ Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat? ‘Love your enemies.’ You can’t be serious!*” Lose points out, “Both commands – and a host of Jesus’ other injunctions to boot, seem from this point of view to be sheer folly, idealistic sentiments that would be crazy to apply in the ‘real’ world.”

Lose concludes, “But here’s the thing: Jesus isn’t kidding and is dead serious about these commands.” **Lose says, “In this sermon, Jesus is outlining his vision of God’s kingdom and issuing a summons to those who desire to be a part of it. Which is why we need to take them seriously.”** (<workingpreacher.org>, “The Revolution Starts Here” by David Lose)

Last Sunday, we examined how Jesus responded to the way the legalists – the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law – applied the Law of Moses. Jesus challenged their approach by focusing on the underlying motives, which lead individuals to destroy relationships and to chase after selfish desires. Then, I believe sarcastically, Jesus applied to the exposure of those motivations the judgmental approach of the legalists, and so, revealed the fallacious nature of their supposed insights. Additionally, it was pointed out Jews during the time of Jesus’ public ministry practiced multiple approaches of understanding and applying the Law of Moses. Thus, Jesus was not alone in challenging the views and actions of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. In today’s Scripture, Jesus is shown to have lifted up two additional traditions of the legalists but over and against those practices, he revealed his new way for those following him. **Jesus calls forth tremendous transformation and the rejection of those old ways.**

The translation of today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading by Eugene H. Peterson is called, “*The Message*”. It provides important insights about what Jesus was trying to communicate. That version’s verses 38-42 say: *“Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.”*

John Petty explains, “Most translations have Jesus saying, *‘Resist not evil,’* or *‘Do not resist an evil person.’*” Petty notes, “Considering that Jesus himself resisted evil wherever it reared its ugly head, and considering that Jesus calls his followers into exactly the same ministry which he is doing, this seems baffling, and contradictory to what follows.”

Petty references the work of Walter Wink to support his evaluation of this matter. Petty shares, “Walter Wink makes the case that *‘antistenai’* has to do with violence. The word is formed from anti – ‘against’ – and stenai – ‘to stand.’ Literally, the word means ‘stand against’ or ‘withstand.’ Wink notes its repeated use in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) as a word for ‘warfare.’ Likewise, it appears in Ephesians in a context of warfare (6:13). Josephus, writing in the time of Jesus, continually uses *‘antistenai’* to mean armed struggle.”

Petty declares, “Therefore, the sentence should be translated: *‘Do not violently resist the evil one.’*” He continues, “This is entirely consistent with the over-all sense of the text, especially as Jesus then moves to some illustrative examples of how to resist evil non-violently.” (<progressiveinvolvement.com>, “Lectionary blogging: Matthew 5:38-48” by John Petty)

As Petty indicated, there are some translations or versions, which claim Jesus told his followers to not resist those doing evil. I agree with Petty that our Lord and Savior does not want us to routinely and violently resist those who try to disrespect us. However, I see Jesus’ message as even more in line with how our Good News – Today’s English Version translates his teaching or call. Our pew Bibles report Jesus said, *“But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.”* Taking the approach used in our pew Bibles, it seems to me Jesus does not want us to act out anger and revenge toward those who seek us harm. In fact, we are to seek to redeem anyone, who follows the world’s philosophy of chasing after personal gain at the expense of someone else. **If you and I and all followers of Jesus Christ take his word’s to heart, then our refusal to be part of revenge and living the way of “tit-for-tat” will provide amazing opportunities to be his agents of transformation and redemption.**

For example, there is a story told about Wade Boggs. “Former Boston Red Sox Hall-of-Fame third baseman Wade Boggs hated Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees; they never gave him that much trouble but because of a fan. That’s right: one fan.

The guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults. It's hard to imagine one fan getting under a player's skin, but this guy had the recipe.

One day as Boggs was warming up, the Boggs had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands, and said fan began his routine, yelling, 'Boggs, you stink' and variations on that theme ... Boggs decided he'd had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands with his friends, and said, 'Hey fella, are you the guy who's always yelling at me?' The man said, 'Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?'"

Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to continue his pre-game routine.

The man never yelled at Boggs again; in fact, he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium." (Phil Thraillkill, Loving Like God Loves)

The generosity and acceptance Boggs showed the disagreeable fan was very much in line with the examples Jesus gave his followers in today's Reading. Remember, Jesus went on to say, ***"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too."*** He continued, ***"And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well."*** ***"And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles."*** ***"When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him."*** All of those examples of generous self-giving would astound almost anyone, who is indoctrinated in the old way of ***"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."*** Some will even respond as did the fan, who had previously been belligerent toward Boggs!

Now, if Jesus only gave his followers the previous list of amazing responses to harassment and suffering, his words would have been an interesting oddity. However, Jesus did not stop there – he lived such generous self-giving and went beyond those examples to embody God's ***Self-Giving "Agape" Love*** for all of us! Yes, he also immediately went on to call all of his followers to radically live this way of self-giving and sacrificial love. Jesus shocked everyone saying, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.'" "But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in Heaven."*** It is by our living in such an astounding and ***"agape"*** loving way that everyone will recognize us as children of our Divine Parent!

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one follower of Jesus who truly understood Jesus' message in our Reading today. "After noting that hate is just as injurious to the hater as the hated, Dr. King says, 'Of course this is not practical; life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog ...'" King continued, "My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. This does not mean that we abandon our righteous efforts. With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love." **Rev. King concluded, "While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community."** (Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., page 596, quoted by Chuck Queen, Love Your Enemies)

Jesus confirmed it is God's Will for us to love – not only one another but even and especially our enemies – those bent on hurting us. Jesus argued against the opposite approach, saying, ***"Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!"***

If you or I have any doubt about Jesus' teaching to be generous with ***"agape" love***, even and especially toward, those, who seek to hate and hurt us, he summed up our Reading, according to our pew Bible, saying, ***"You must be perfect - just as your Father in Heaven is perfect."*** Unfortunately, the translators failed to make a good choice in their selection of the appropriate words for this translation. Instead, I agree with the way D. Mark Davis translates this verse, ***"Therefore, you will be complete as your father in heaven is complete."*** (<leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com>, "Be Perfect as Nature is Perfect" by D. Mark Davis)

Indeed, our Divine Parent ***"is complete"*** because of God's ***"Agape" Self-Giving and Suffering Love*** for all people, which was demonstrated through the embodiment of God's Love in the life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Almighty, for the purpose of humanity's relationship with God being transformed and reconciled! You and I – all people are called to also be ***"complete"*** by living out that same ***"agape" love*** in our relationships with all people – even those who want to hurt or abuse us! Instead of tuning out Jesus' words in today's Scripture with a big ***"What?"***, let us be ***"complete"*** as the Divine Parent ***"is complete"*** – let us follow Jesus' call to embody ***"agape" self-giving and sacrificial love***. Amen.