

Expanding Boundaries

Matthew 5:38-48

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A few years ago I was given a children's book by Maurice Sendak– his most famous book is probably "Where the Wild Things Are." But this was a Maurice Sendak book I hadn't heard of, called "Brundibar." It's based on a Czech opera that tells the story of two children who confront a bully. Brundibar is an awful, terrible tyrant with a giant mustache who plays an organ grinder for money in the town square. He chases away the two children– but they return along with three hundred friends and animals, who together are able to vanquish the bully Brundibar. Two little children couldn't defeat Brundibar, but three hundred of them sure could. The closing lines of the book read:

"Flute, french horn, bassoon, and clarinet!
The wicked never win, we have our victory yet!
Tyrants come along, but you just wait and see!
They topple one-two-three!
Our friends make us strong!
And thus we end our song."

Maybe you already see where I'm headed in telling you the story of Brundibar; the idea that a non-violent group of oppressed people can defeat a bully has everything to do with our text this morning.

Our reading today comes right out of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which we've been exploring over several weeks now. Today's passage might sound familiar, at least the part about turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. To start out, I'd just like to acknowledge that there is danger in interpreting this text literally. At some points in history, turning the other cheek has been taken to mean that marginalized people should just endure abuse, like those experiencing slavery or domestic violence. That is absolutely a perversion of how Jesus is operating in this text, he is neither encouraging violence nor telling his followers to passively take a physical beating. He's certainly not saying that the beating itself is legitimate, the way white slave-holders read this passage before the Civil War. This morning we will explore how Jesus is actually subverting the dominant culture, using its language and ideas, and a little humor, to create a practice of active non-violent resistance. Jesus teaches

us to love our enemies because our goal as human beings is to reflect the character of God.

When we put this reading in context, we should remember that the Bible was written by and for people who were living under severe persecution. Jesus' audience existed under the imperial occupation of Rome, and nothing was more brutal than the court system. Punishments could be extreme, and people who went to court sometimes did not come home all in one piece, so it was important for Jesus to offer his hearers a way to actively resist without getting themselves killed. I have to admit that even though I've read this passage many times, I came to several stopping points— one of them is when Jesus says, "Do not resist." Did Jesus really just say that? I remember a few weeks ago, a beautiful baptism where promises were made "to resist the powers of evil," maybe you remember that too? I believe the church universal is meant to resist evil, isn't that what Oscar Romero or Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr or Dorothy Day did, to resist the evils of oppression and racism and poverty? And aren't they some of the great saints of our tradition? But here Jesus seems to be saying, in the Sermon on the Mount no less, not to resist evil— how can that be? I decided to investigate! The original Greek word *antistenai* is what's been translated as "resist." It's a compound word— anti (against) and stenai (stand). Put together, "to stand against." But *antistenai* is actually a specific military term meaning a violent counterattack, and that's how it's translated in other parts of the Bible. Read this way, Jesus is saying, "do not mount a violent military counterattack." He's not saying "do not resist," that is how King James translated it, for his own (probably political) reasons. Jesus is saying don't fight violence with more violence. Or as the band U2 dedicated their song "Miss Sarajevo" at a live concert, "We would like to turn our song into a prayer and our prayer is that we do not become a monster in order to defeat a monster." Jesus is saying yes, resist evil, but don't mount *antistenai*, a violent military opposition. So often we human beings think with the part of our brains that are wired for fight-or-flight. But here Jesus is saying not to run away or to fight. Instead he's offering a third way, the way of non-violent resistance.

In his first example of active non-violent resistance, Jesus says "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." One of the punishments meted out by the Roman courts was to be slapped back-handed with the right hand. The back-handed slap was a sign of power over another. When Jesus says "turn the other cheek," he is actually saying that if your punishment is to be struck on the cheek, turn your face the other direction and offer your left cheek. This will put you in the position of not allowing another back-handed slap; the alternatives would be for the punisher to use his left hand to create a back-handed slap (which was seen as unclean and taboo), or to use his fist (and fistfights only happened among equals, not in a power-over

situation). Turning the other cheek effectively forces the person in power to see his victim as an equal.

Jesus offers a second example of non-violent resistance: “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” In Jesus’ time peasants wore an outer coat on top of an inner cloak. When the poor had debts to pay, they had to give their outer coat as collateral, because they had nothing else to corroborate their loan. Jesus says to give the inner cloak as well– this effectively leaves a person with no clothes on. Although nakedness was taboo in ancient Hebrew culture, the shame of nakedness fell upon the person viewing the nakedness, not the naked person him/herself. Jesus’ audience would have heard the irony here: the poor are not to blame for having nothing but the coat on their backs; the deep shame of poverty belongs to the rich.

Theologian Walter Wink tells this modern story of an oppressed group using the shame of nakedness as an act of resistance:

Under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the authorities had for a long time sought a way to destroy a particular shantytown, without success. Then one day, after most of the men and women had left for work, the army arrived. The soldiers announced that the few women there had five minutes to gather their things and then the bulldozers would commence to work. The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled.

If the Powers that Be, whether Roman occupiers or the military of South African Apartheid, stand primarily on their dignity, they are rendered powerless quite quickly when that dignity is removed.

What may seem like Jesus saying to give and give until you have nothing left is actually Jesus using a bit of humor and provocation to make a point. When Jesus’ audience heard him saying to strip down naked in response to the systemic problem of poverty, they would have chuckled to themselves. Imagine someone standing in their underwear in front of a debt collector! He’s effectively “mooning” the whole system of oppression.

Humor can really defuse a charged situation. In my own home, I know you’ll find this hard to believe, but I do get frustrated from time to time– especially around the issue of tidying up. If just one person in the household can make a joke about the stinky socks on the couch, it can make me (and the whole room) relax. The alternative is

often to escalate irritation into the level of argument. When human beings escalate and escalate, the fight-or-flight trigger in our reptilian lizard brains causes us to react rather than to respond. There's a big difference between reacting to a situation from a place of hot-headed emotion versus responding thoughtfully. And usually, just because one person is feeling reactive does not mean the whole environment needs to be lurched into reactivity. Humor can be used to "take it down a notch," de-escalating a system enough for us to take a breath, and move into a better place for responsiveness. As writer Katie Painter says, "if we want to be better than lizards we have to remind ourselves constantly that we are human. A good way to start is by quieting the din of cultural argument and listening to the still, small voice that's in your heart." In other words, take a breath, use humor to unexpectedly defuse ourselves, and listen for the ways God is leading us to respond.

In his third example of non-violent active resistance, Jesus says "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." The idea of going one mile comes from Roman occupation, where leaders kept their troops moving by allowing soldiers to compel local citizens to carry their gear for them. The limit was that a soldier could only force someone to carry his load for exactly one mile, no more, lest the soldiers be perceived as taking advantage of the locals. If a peasant kept going for a second mile, as Jesus says to do, no doubt the soldier would be worried about getting in trouble. Carrying a 65 pound pack for two miles may not seem like an act of resistance, but in effect, going the second mile meant taking control out of the hands of the oppressor. At the very least, the soldier would have been thrown off-balance, he would have felt discomfort and been left wondering what this person was up to. Jesus did not say go an extra hundred miles, but go just one more- enough to restore the human dignity of the peasant.

What do turning the other cheek, taking off our clothes, and going the extra mile look like for us today? It looks like some of our UCC clergy in San Francisco training to be first-responders at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, to be ready with resources and stand with the families who are left behind after a raid. It looks like a UCC church in Vermont actively hosting a refugee family from Congo and sending its youth group to Standing Rock Indian Reservation as water protectors, in order to strengthen its commitment to racial diversity. It might even mean Christians registering as Muslims should a Muslim Registry ever occur.

But what about the second part of our text for today, the part where Jesus says we should love our enemies? Dang, that seems just really hard. The political context of our country right now is so divided, without much room in the middle for real conversation to happen. Even my examples about ICE raids and Standing Rock are

probably a little partisan, to be honest. Jesus says, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... for [God] makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good." We may feel that sunlight on our faces, but surely those who think differently from us also feel the same sunlight warming their days. At this point, if I could ask Jesus a question, it might be, Is it really possible to be in a non-violent resistance movement, and remain in healthy contact with people who are in opposition to that movement? How do we interrupt the polarization that keeps us unable to love our enemies?

I heard on the radio recently that online dating services are finding the political divide playing out on their matchmaking sites. Evidently conservatives want to look for dates that are conservative, and liberals are looking to date other liberals. One woman said, "If you are a Trump supporter, I don't even want to consider meeting you for coffee...it's a deal-breaker for me." Similarly, the "red hat" nation is feeling the same way—one man even started his own dating site, TrumpSingles.com, saying "it's both ways, a liberal doesn't want to date a Nazi, and a republican doesn't want to date, well, a whiny snowflake, and that's what they're viewing each other as." I get it, I really do—why try to make a love connection with someone who might not share your core values? The problem is, how do you know that someone with differing politics doesn't share your core values, unless you talk to them?

The data is showing that liberals are more likely to spurn conservatives than the other way around. Could it be that liberals are more judgmental than conservatives? Ouch. Jesus says, "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Don't even the Gentiles do that?" Who knew that being able to converse with someone different in our own families, on facebook, in church, would be so difficult—and yet such a radical act? How can we create safe spaces for respectful and engaging conversation to happen? And why should we even try?

Jesus says we should love our enemies, not to create a better world, or to convert our enemies into our beliefs, or even to be better people. Jesus is not promoting "moral therapeutic deism," or some "prosperity gospel," where his followers are supposed to just be good people, be in touch with God when they need something, where the goal of life is to be happy and have nice things. No, Jesus is offering something much more radical— he's saying that the goal of discipleship is to imitate God. Jesus says we should love our enemies because in doing so we will reflect the character of God. He's not saying "go forth and be nice," he's saying "Be perfect as God is perfect." Jesus doesn't mean to be a perfectionist, he means to actively change

systems that oppress, stand on the side of the poor, and work toward perfectly loving our enemies. We don't have to be all healed and ready to offer our gifts to others, but we do have to try to love others the way God does, even when it's not our first instinct. We have to try.

There's more to "Brundibar," the story of children defeating a bully, that I'd like to share with you. Maurice Sendak's version of "Brundibar" is based on a play that was performed in Prague at a Nazi concentration camp in 1938. The children of the camp performed it 55 times, starting out with contraband instruments that had been smuggled into the camp. At one point the Nazi regime co-opted the play, making a propaganda video to show the world how happy and cultured the camps were. In the end, only 1,000 of the 15,000 children at the camp survived. Some of the survivors who participated in the original production have made it a habit to attend "Brundibar" plays over the years, often being invited to join the cast on stage for the final song. Although the Nazis never caught on to the symbolism of the mustached Brundibar, the Jewish people in the camp knew what it meant, and it gave them hope that they were not entirely powerless. The message, "Our friends make us strong" in toppling bullies and tyrants is important for all movements of non-violent resistance. As writer Katie Painter writes, resistance "requires stamina and a very high pain threshold. It requires the ability to lose over and over and over again. It demands that we never give up or give in, even when we are exhausted, even when we are stumbling around, clutching our aching hearts." Because even though a new Brundibar will emerge in every age, the path Jesus puts forth, the path of Non-violent Resistance and Love eventually wins. Amen.

Jesus and Nonviolence, A Third Way. Walter Wink. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2003.

Brundibar. Maurice Sendak & Tony Kushner. Michael Di Capua/Hyperion Books for Children, 2003.