

29 September 2024, Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Muskegon, MI
Tom Wagner, “Turning the Other Cheek and Loving Enemies”, Matthew 5:38-48

About 20 minutes into Richard Attenborough’s 1982 movie “Gandhi” white Anglican clergyman Charles Andrews is talking with Gandhi enroute to Gandhi’s Johannesburg law office. Though this is decades before the official enactment of the apartheid system, white colonizers had already imposed numerous legal and cultural restrictions on both native Africans and Indian guest workers. On this walk, Andrews and Gandhi encounter a small group of young white street thugs. One of the young men makes an insulting remark about the pair as the group starts to block the sidewalk. Charlie begins to suggest that they should retreat and take another route for Gandhi’s safety, but Gandhi interrupts:

GANDHI: Doesn't the New Testament say, "If your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left"?

CHARLIE: I think perhaps the phrase was used metaphorically... I don't think our Lord meant --

GANDHI: I'm not so certain. I have thought about it a great deal. I suspect he meant you must show courage -- be willing to take a blow -- several blows -- to show you will not strike back -- nor will you be turned aside... And when you do that, it calls upon something in human nature -- something that makes his hate for you diminish and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I have seen it work.

*Gandhi faces the youths and greets them with a friendly and confident “Good morning”. They respond with racial slurs in their demand to get off the sidewalk moving within striking distance toward Gandhi. At this point the **mother** of one of the young men interrupts, shouting from an upstairs window “...What are you doing?”*

*Her **son** responds, “Nothing. We were just cleaning up the neighborhood a little.”*

While it is clear from the mother’s facial expression that she has no sympathy for Gandhi, she also doesn’t want her son and his friends to cause any unnecessary trouble. She again shouts at the youths in a disgusted tone reminding them that they are already late for work. Gandhi again speaks to the youths:

GANDHI: You'll find there's room for us both.

As Gandhi and Charlie walk past the group unmolested, Charlie remarks:

CHARLIE: That was lucky.

GANDHI: I thought you were a man of God.

CHARLIE: I am. But I'm not so egotistical as to think He plans His day around my dilemmas.

This is one of my favorite scenes from the movie for at least a couple of reasons. One, it is a very practical application of the gospel passage. Two, I love the irony of the Hindu lawyer schooling a western clergyman about the meaning of Jesus’ teaching.

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I had a couple requests this past summer to speak on “**turning the other cheek**”. The phrase can be found in both the gospels of Matthew and Luke. As per this morning’s reading, I will focus on Matthew’s version. Folks might notice that I read the full text from 5:38-48. While scholars often divide the passage into two separate topics in commentaries: “On Retaliation” (vv. 38-42) and “On Love of One’s Enemies” (vv.43-48), the Common Lectionary treats these verses as a single reading. I plan to begin with an overview of Matthew’s gospel, including its place in the New Testament cannon, its relationship to the other gospels and its major theme before zooming in on today’s text. From there I will discuss how the passage has influenced Christian pacifist traditions.

The New Testament begins with four separate accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth known as “**gospels**.” Matthew has been placed first because it contains the most references to the Hebrew scriptures and hence serves as a bridge between the testaments.

Three of the gospels-- Matthew, Mark and Luke share a significant amount of content, while 90% of John's gospel appears to come from other sources. Scholars generally accept that Matthew and Luke copied much of their writings from the older and shorter **Gospel of Mark**. To this they added material from a **common source (Q)** independent of Mark, which likely explains the frequency of parallel passages between the two. Today's reading is an example since a version of it can also be found in Luke 6. This is in addition to **special material** found only in either Matthew or Luke.

Matthew's primary purpose is to present **Jesus as the long-awaited messiah**, requiring the author to establish his **legitimacy and authority**. This is done overtly by **applying old scripture passages** to events in the life of Jesus. Yet more subtle literary devices may be at work. Many commentators have suggested that Matthew's gospel is organized around **five discourses** or speeches surrounded by narrative. These discourses may reference the five books of the Torah or first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The first discourse appears in Ch. 5-7 and is commonly titled the "Sermon on the Mount", which includes today's text. **Setting** the sermon on a mountain may also be an homage to Moses and the events at Mount Sinai. Jesus is described as sitting as he speaks, which was the accepted practice of rabbis at the time.

While the discourse is presented as a single sermon, more likely it is a **collection Jesus' sayings** on various topics. The first 16 verses of Ch. 5 serve as a prologue to the collection. Vv. 1-2 give a narrative introduction describing the setting. Vv. 3-12 are usually referred to as "the Beatitudes" since nine of the verses in many English translations begin with the words "**Blessed are...**". Each describes a characteristic or behavior followed by a promise, ending with blessing of those persecuted for the sake of faith. Following close behind in vv. 13-16 are metaphors describing the new faith community as salt and light. If salt is not salty or light not visible, they are useless. Jesus calls his followers to stand out in the world, to live a life beyond popular convention.

Beginning in v. 17 through the end of the chapter Jesus speaks more concretely on several ethical issues. He starts his remarks by stating his commitment to scripture. "**Think not that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.**" Around 80-90 C.E. when Matthew is widely thought to have been written, the issue of **scriptural authority** was a common topic of discussion in both Jewish and Christian communities. Worship at the Jerusalem Temple had been an important source of **Jewish identity**. It's destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E. forced the community to lean more heavily on sacred writings for that identity. In a community widely scattered throughout the known world, these writings had the advantage of being a portable source of identity. While these texts had a long history in the tradition, it was during this era that a group of rabbis finally codified which books were included in the Hebrew canon. As the **Christian community** began to form a separate identity from Judaism the question was how closely they were obligated to continue to follow the Law of Moses and Jewish practice, especially Gentile converts. Jesus affirms his commitment to scripture and explains their fulfilment in a series examples, which move beyond rules and customs to deeper intentions.

Jesus offers six examples using the formula "**You have heard it said..., but I say to you...**" focusing on how we live together. In vv. 21-26 he suggests that murder is rooted in unbridled anger and that reconciliation takes precedence even over worship. The second and third examples in vv. 27-30 and vv. 31-32 move beyond simple marital fidelity to the over all welfare of ones' marital partner, which was particularly important in a patriarchal culture. Vv. 33-37 promote consistent honesty. Historically Anabaptists and Quakers refused to swear out civil oaths based on this passage. One of my seminary professors used to quip that it was a bit silly to swear an oath on a book that teaches one not to swear.

When Jesus quoted, "**You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**" in v. 38 he likely was thinking of one of three references to the Torah: Exodus 21:24-25, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. The Deuteronomy text reads, "**...life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.**" While the Torah passages permitted retribution and compensation for injury, the clear intention was also to limit bloodshed and injury to a proportional response in a culture where blood feuds were common. Sadly,

these situations often spiral into increasing cycles of violence. Currently in the name of “defense” the state of Israel has violated its own stated values on a ratio of 1,200 to over 40,000 since October 7th.

Jesus continues in v. 39, “**But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil.**” It is a way to break the cycle of revenge. This verse is the source of the term “**nonresistance**” which is the traditional name for the nonviolence teachings among the peace churches. Jesus follows the statement with four concrete examples of the concept. “**Turning the other cheek**” comes first. Commentators often speak of how willingness to take a second blow is an act of courage, as Gandhi understood. It is a way to take the initiative away from the aggressor. It is a way to stand up to a bully without causing harm. The second example suggests a response to a **lawsuit** in which a creditor seeks to take one garment—give them both. In those days many people only had two garments. Their nakedness would expose the creditor’s injustice. The third gives a response to the law that a Roman soldier could force anyone to carry his baggage for a mile. Taking it the **second mile** took initiative away from the oppressor and even put the soldier in legal jeopardy. The fourth example about **giving to beggars and borrowers** fits into other teachings about debt forgiveness in the Torah connected to Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles which Jesus strongly endorsed.

There is a story often retold about a Dunker elder who served my childhood congregation of Myerstown in eastern Pennsylvania during the first two decades of the 20th Century by the name of **John Herr** (1848-1931). One-night Elder Herr was awakened by a noise from his smokehouse. He quietly got out of bed and made his way to the smokehouse to investigate. There he discovered two men, one at the door receiving hams passed to him by another inside the building. The unannounced appearance of the Dunker elder startled the thief at the door so much that he ran off without warning his partner. Brother Herr said nothing, and simply stood in the man’s place by the door. When the thief who was unaware of the switch asked how many hams he should take, Brother Herr replied that he might as well take them all. Only then did the thief realize he had been caught in the act and tried to escape. Recognizing the thief as one of his neighbors, Herr strongly urged him to take at least one ham home to his family. At first the man refused, saying he didn’t need a ham. The elder countered that anyone who sneaked on to his neighbor’s homestead in the middle of the night for ham must be in desperate need. Again, Herr insisted that his neighbor take a ham home and suggested that next time he needed food to just come and ask. He could have as much food as he needed. It is said that Elder Herr never revealed the identities of his late-night visitors, even to his own family.

While the teachings about nonresistance are negative in the sense of do no harm, loving your enemy is the positive side of peacemaking. In v. 43 Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’**” The first part of the quote about loving one’s neighbor comes straight from Leviticus 19:18 in the Torah. The second part about hate cannot be found in the Hebrew scriptures. That part may have been a common folk saying. When Jesus follows with v. 44, “**But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...**” he in a sense is expanding the definition of neighbor. It is easy to love those who care about our well-being. The challenge is to love to those who do not like us or even seek to do us harm.

The story is told of the 16th century Dutch Mennonite **Dirk Willems**. The year was 1569. Willems had been jailed by the authorities of Asperen, Netherlands for the crime of heresy--a crime punishable by death. Due to his poor jail diet Dirk lost considerable weight and was eventually able to escape squeezing through the bars of his cell. However, the jailer quickly discovered his flight and began chasing him through the countryside. Willems’ weight loss also allowed him to safely cross an ice-covered canal, but the heavier jailer fell through. Rather than take advantage of this new opportunity to escape, Dirk turned around and rescued the jailer. The grateful jailer would have granted Willems his freedom, had it not been for the strenuous objection of the Burgermeister who reminded the jailer of his oath of office. Dirk Willems was arrested, tried and burned at the stake. His story is among the best know of the 16th century Anabaptist martyrs.

As I mentioned earlier, my spiritual ancestors especially in the 18th and 19th Centuries spoke of their peace witness as “**nonresistance**” a term coined from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:39. It was not only a personal

ethic of living peaceably among one's close neighbors; there was also the expectation that church members would refuse military service. While nonviolence was seen as an integral part following of Jesus, they rarely lobbied to change government policies, other than seeking exemptions from the military. Vowing not to kill people is a good practical step on the road to peace, but it can come off rather **passive**.

As Brethren became more civically involved, members wanted to find **ways to serve the common good in nonlethal ways**. They also saw the value of voicing their opposition to war to the governing authorities. Some young men were willing to take on noncombatant roles, against the advice of the church. Though provisions had been made for conscientious objector status during **World War I**, the Wilson Administration strongly resisted implementing them. Due to difficulties experienced during the first war, Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers (often known as the Historic Peace Churches) began to meet with the Roosevelt Administration in the late 1930s to suggest an alternative service program. The World War II program became **Civilian Public Service** (C.P.S.), administered by the government, but wholly funded by the churches. Peace Bonds were issued to donors, though there was no expectation that the bonds would be paid back. The bonds did give conscientious donors some protection against aggressive War Bond drives in their home communities. Early projects focused on forestry and soil conservation, in many cases taking over abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camps. Later projects included mental hospitals, public health and starvation experiments. Experience gained through C.P.S. and pressure from Dunker youth led to the creation of an alternative service program fully under denominational administration in 1948: **Brethren Volunteer Service**. My parents met in this program, and its ethos loomed large during my childhood.

Formal training and many informal conversations among folks in these programs planted seeds for a **bolder witness**. These began a deeper focus on the roots of violence in injustice. There were members of the Historic Peace Churches paying attention to Gandhi's nonviolent methods in early 20th century South Africa and India, but it would take Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others to introduce disciplined nonviolent action to an American audience as an effective strategy for social change. The Civil Rights Movement made my faith community more open to public forms protest like prayer vigils and marches.

At the onset of the Gulf War **Wendell Berry** wrote a lengthy essay titled "**Peaceableness Toward Enemies**" in which he used Luke's parallel (6:27-28) to Matthew 5:44.

"...there is one great possibility that we have hardly tried: that we come to peace by being peaceable. That possibility, though little honored, is well known, its most famous statement is this: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them who hate you, pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.' I did not include this idea as a precious possession of our civilization because it is not one. It is an idea given to our civilization but so far not accepted."

Notes

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