

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
February 24, 2019 7th Sunday of Year C Luke 6:27-38

Like a fine wine that does not travel very well, many of the words of Jesus suffer the same fate, in that because we do not know the context, the audience, or the language in which these words were first told, we may interpret them in a way much different than that which Jesus intended. So, it is with the examples Jesus gives us in today's gospel—of turning the other cheek, of giving up one's tunic, one's inner garment, and, in another gospel, of walking the extra mile. The way that we have been accustomed to hear these passages gives us the impression that Jesus is asking us to be a punching bag or a doormat, neither of which is acceptable. Because we are unfamiliar with the world in which Jesus lived, these examples lose their distinctive flavor. Instead of advising us how to assert our human dignity, they seem to be doing the very opposite—at best encouraging us to be meek and mild, and at worst to be the target for another's violence.

So, let's look at them one by one. What does it mean to turn the other cheek? In Jesus' day the aggressor would usually strike with his left hand, since the left hand was used for what were considered inferior tasks. So, by striking an individual with his left hand, besides inflicting pain, he would also be asserting his superiority. If that person, after being struck were to turn his head and offer his right cheek, he would be challenging the aggressor to strike him with his right hand, no longer allowing himself to be presented as an inferior but now as an equal. Secondly, if someone were sued for payment and had to offer his cloak, Jesus says he should offer his tunic, his inner garment, as well. That would render him naked. And in Jewish law it was considered a great injustice to humiliate someone in that manner. So, by offering both his inner and outer garment, the individual is shaming his aggressor into acting fairly. In another gospel Jesus speaks of "going the extra mile," i.e., "if someone asks you to go one mile with them, go two miles." This refers to the obligation a Jew had to carry a Roman soldier's gear for the distance of one mile. But according to Roman law, he only had to carry it for one mile and no more. And if he were forced to carry the gear further, he could report the Roman soldier to his commanding officer, whereupon that soldier would be disciplined. In all three examples Jesus presents individuals, less powerful than their aggressor, who are being victimized in one way or another. Jesus does not counsel them to be passive victims, but neither should they respond with violence. They are to use their imagination; they are advised to be quick-witted in finding a way to assert their human dignity in the face of aggression.

We hear Jesus say, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless

those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” It seems to make no sense at all. Or, as Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher/theologian once characterized it, “Most people really believe that the Christian commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself is intentionally a little too severe—like setting the alarm clock ahead half an hour to be sure of not being late in the morning.” In other words, set the bar rather high, so that we won’t be governed by our baser instincts. Yet we see examples of Christians doing exactly what Jesus asks of us, even in contemporary American life. I am thinking of those African-Americans who forgave the white supremacist who murdered the members of their families, gathered for a Bible-study in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. Or the Amish mother and father in Lancaster, Penn., whose two daughters were among the five killed in a schoolhouse, and yet attended the murderer’s funeral to be a support to his parents. To forgive is not to excuse or condone, but it is to provide the opportunity for a new future to be played out, and not to allow the past to happen over and over again now.

Jesus gives another reason for why we are to love our enemies. He says, then “we will be children of the Most High, for He is kind to ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as He is merciful.” If God is truly present to us, and we to God, and God cannot be anything but love, then we cannot be anything but love as well. When we come to operate from that centering awareness, we begin to control the circumstances of our lives, rather than have those circumstances control us. We do not become like our enemies, responding like for like, returning violence with more violence, and escalating a little each time. That is the power our enemies have over us—to make us like themselves.

We can act differently. We can forgive, we can let go of our grudges and not hold onto them like a dog holds onto its favorite bone, and then we are forgiven. We can stop judging and then we will not be judged; we can stop condemning and we will not be condemned. Jesus is telling us that our individual actions go a long way to creating the world we live in. If our actions are continually judgmental and condemnatory, they will come back to bite us, swallowing us up in a cloud of negative fury, distorting everything we see. When we are targeting others with our judgments, we are at the same time feeding our severe inner-critic, the voice within that demands we measure up more and more to the sometimes unrealistic, even impossible, standards that we set for ourselves. We may think we are doing others a favor by forgiving them, but in fact we become the beneficiaries of our own kindness. Jesus concludes this passage by saying, “The measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” A generosity of spirit extended towards others flows back into our own lives, lifting our own spirits, while a petty narrowness and judgmentalism simply provides us with a score-card to go through life by which no one is ever going

to measure up, including ourselves. To a large degree we create the world we live in.

How do we avoid the trap of responding like for like? When attacked, whether physically or verbally, we are most inclined to react instinctively, to go for the jugular, operating from the reptilian part of our brain, that most primitive part, developed in the earliest stage of human evolution, where the immediate reaction is one of self-protection. In the examples Jesus gives us of turning the other cheek, of giving up the inner tunic, of walking the extra mile, we are to pause, to respond instead of reacting. Reaction is reflexive, knee-jerk, automatic, mindless. Response is mindful, employing all the resources of our imagination to figure out a better way of dealing with the situation. It is the wisdom of "counting to ten" before firing back, not just to give ourselves a few moments to calm down, but to return to that inner space where we are present to a loving God and God to us, empowering us to act in kindness and not in spite, with fairness and not out of revenge. In that interior space we are free to decide how we are going to respond, rather than snap back lizard-like. Stephen P. Covey, the author of the best selling, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," said there is an eighth habit. He wrote, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness." Of course, Jesus said it all before. In the words of G.K. Chesterton, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it's that it has been found difficult and has not been tried."

As we approach the altar of the Lord in the Eucharist, let us pray that we can learn to respond and not simply react, that we can use the power of our imagination to find creative solutions to difficult situations, and that we can develop a generosity of spirit to engage whatever life throws at us. Then we can show we are indeed the children of a merciful God.