



"Tools for the Resistance"
Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby
Luke 6:27-38

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How are we to live faithfully in a world that is filled with violence and evil? How are we to live in a world and in a time in which people would do harm to those we love?

Week by week we have been hearing the teachings of Jesus that are found in his "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke. These have been some of the most challenging words of Jesus – an invitation to participate in God's upside-down kingdom. We are so used to living in a might makes right world, a world where status is measured by wealth and power, that from the beginning, Jesus' words are shocking.

This passage we just heard flows directly from the gospel passage last week that began with Jesus saying, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:20-21). Jesus has been teaching a shocking message that in the kingdom of

God, the lowly will be raised up and loved and vindicated. Blessed.

And the teachings from Jesus go on, subverting and challenging the common wisdom of the day, urging his disciples to go deeper and purer. These are aspirational teachings – encouraging his followers to live better, to restrain themselves more than the laws would demand. These are teachings meant to shake up our notions of how the world works and what possibilities exist for God's goodness to barge in.

This passage today may sound particularly pie-in-the-sky, otherworldly, unrealistic. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

On first read, it is as if Jesus is encouraging us to give up in the face of a bully. But what if I tell you that this was a favorite passage of Gandhi¹ and Martin Luther King, Jr.²? What if I tell you that if we understand Jesus' teaching in this passage we might learn of a revolutionary kind of

love that can power a resistance to evil and an utter rejection of the powers of violence itself? Would you be willing to give this a deeper listen?

In a world that can be dehumanizing, in a world in which suddenly you can be assaulted or persecuted or treated poorly, how do you assert your dignity, your humanity? I think about the striking sanitation workers in Memphis, joined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in the days before he was assassinated. In an image seared into my brain King is linked arm in arm with striking workers who carried signs that read simply, "I am a man."

Jesus did not live in a time when people could easily protest dehumanizing practices. They could not voice their concerns to representatives and senators. Letters to the editor would not be published. Jesus did not live in a time, nor in a democracy, when people could expect checks and balances or look toward a new election. He lived during a military occupation, in a country where Roman soldiers were omnipresent. The Roman soldiers had come to think of the Jewish people not as equals, but as a population to police. Their job was to keep things quiet, to keep the locals in their place. So powerful, so present were they, that religious questions of that place and time had an implicit second half to the question. But what about the Roman soldiers?

"Love your enemies," Jesus said, and the people who heard him wondered, "but what about the Roman soldiers?" And you need to know about Roman soldiers to understand that Jesus is teaching a form of resistance that provided dignity and

humanity and a better way forward. Resistance we might miss if we didn't know about the Roman soldiers roaming the streets. Resistance in this teaching that we might miss if forget about the Roman soldiers.

The people who first heard Jesus would have known all about the Roman soldiers. But we need some background in order to understand what Jesus was really teaching. And to this, I will be drawing heavily from the work of Warren Carter, a Bible scholar.³

"If anyone strikes you on the cheek," Jesus begins (Luke 6:29). Think not a punch but a slap. A painful insult. The powerful person was perfectly entitled to slap with the back of the right hand. That was an acceptable form of violence. And by slapping someone on their right cheek, "It expresses the power differential of a superior who disdains an inferior: a master with a slave, a wealthy landowner with a poor farmer . . . a Roman" soldier with a local . . . This action was designed to hurt and humiliate. "No response except submission is expected."

People who were struck on the cheek thought that they had two bad options: be humiliated and take it; or lash back in violence and face further punishment. And to the people who were too used to being on the receiving end of those humiliating slaps, Jesus teaches a third way - turn the other cheek. It shows that one has not been intimidated or provoked into uncontrolled actions. It also means that if the person wanted to hit you a second time, they could not - you can't hit someone on the left cheek with the back of your right hand.

Try it! (Wait, don't actually try it – but hold up your hand and you will see what I mean.)

Warren Carter summarizes "It is a chosen, active, nonviolent response to a system designed to humiliate. . . . It refuses submission, asserts dignity . . . and challenges what is supposed to demean."

To be able to love yourself when the world feels arrayed against you. To love yourself when you are persecuted and oppressed. To be able to stand up and assert your dignity in the face of a challenging ethical situation.

The second resistance teaching: "and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt" (Luke 6:29). In that time the Romans were taking the wealth out of the country, and the middle class was becoming poor and those already poor were at great risk. In this time of tremendous economic upheaval, loans were to be guaranteed by a pledge. A poor person may have to pledge his coat, in which case the lending party is to return it by nightfall so that the poor person can keep warm. Jesus' teaching puts us in the place of the "poor peasant farmer, who cannot repay a loan and whose land is about to be seized (if it hasn't been already) being sued by creditors for almost the last thing he has." Jesus had said, "blessed are the poor." Well, the rubber meets the road here. When they are coming after your last coat, how does a poor person respond?"

This act, giving up your shirt as well as your coat, your outer garment and then your inner garment. Why strip oneself naked in court? This gesture represents the

stripping away of land and property which the creditor is enacting. By standing naked before one's creditor who has both garments in his hand, one shames and dishonors the creditor. Nakedness exposes the greed and cruel effect of the creditor's action and the unjust system the creditor represents. "The act enables the poor to take some initiative against power that seems ultimate. The act protests by unmasking the powerful one's heartless demands as inhuman, and the act offers the possibility of a different relationship, even reconciliation."

I saw a cartoon of this resistance act. One person is standing buck naked saying, "You want my coat? Here, take my cloak too, I insist." And the embarrassed other person says, "No, stop! I just want the coat – really!" Humor can be a great leveling tool – a way of resisting evil without hating the one opposed.

So that is the coat and shirt background. But I think it can be extended beyond Roman clothing to a more general principle. I told this story one other time, but a number of years ago, on National Public Radio's StoryCorps I heard a modern-day story about this teaching being lived out.

In 2008, Julio Diaz was a 31-year-old social worker. Every day he would end his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, to eat at his favorite diner.

But one night, as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife.

"He wants my money, so I just gave him my wallet and told him, 'Here you go,'" Diaz says.

As the teen began to walk away, Diaz told him, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The would-be robber looked at his would-be victim, "like what's going on here?" Diaz says. "He asked me, 'Why are you doing this?'"

Diaz replied: "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner and if you really want to join me ... hey, you're more than welcome.

"You know, I just felt maybe he really needs help," Diaz says.

Diaz says he and the teen went into the diner and sat in a booth.

"The manager comes by, the dishwashers come by, the waiters come by to say hi," Diaz says. "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?'"

"No, I just eat here a lot," Diaz says he told the teen. "He says, 'But you're even nice to the dishwasher.'"

Diaz replied, "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?"

"Yea, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the teen said.

Diaz asked him what he wanted out of life. "He just had almost a sad face," Diaz says.

The teen couldn't answer Diaz — or he didn't want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for this. So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

The teen "didn't even think about it" and returned the wallet, Diaz says. "I gave him \$20 ... I figure maybe it'll help him. I don't know."

Diaz says he asked for something in return — the teen's knife — "and he gave it to me."

"I figure, you know, if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."⁴

If people would begin to embrace the teachings of Jesus, the world can turn upside down. A love that is revolutionary. A love that resists tribalism. That doesn't bracket off some people. If one can actually turn the other cheek after getting slapped, if one is at risk of losing his cloak and hands over all his clothes, the acts show an imaginative willingness to live with dignity and hope. The subservient has seized the initiative, chosen the action, made the oppressor

worry, possibly opened the way to a different relationship, and suggested that though the Roman Empire is strong, God's kingdom is even more powerful.

This is not easy stuff - knowing how to resist and not participate in violence and evil and truth telling. We don't have Roman soldiers slapping us. We no longer use coats as a loan pledge. Yet we are living in a time of violence and tribalism that keeps dividing us humans up into us and them. We are living out the consequences, I believe, of a gradual but certain political polarization based on the belief that it is okay to create enemies, that our country can be split between us and them, and the further assumption that everyone knows what to do with enemies – hate them. It has never been easy to follow in the ways of Jesus who taught us to love and pray not just for our neighbors but also for our enemies. There are things we can and must resist if we claim allegiance to the kingdom of God. But if we can follow in these difficult ways, it may just be that our actions can be world-changing.

Madeleine L'Engle's classic book for kids, *A Wrinkle in Time* was written in the 1960s but I commend it to kids and to parents for our time. The story tells about children who participate on the side of goodness in a cosmic battle against the forces of evil. In a scene in which three children: Meg and Charles Murray and Calvin O'Keefe get their first real look at evil, and the wonderful characters Mrs. Which, Mrs. Whatsit and Ms. Who offer reassurance and a charge. They show the children evil and here is the conversation that follows.

"But what is it?" Calvin demanded.
 "We know that it's evil, but what is it?"
 "Yyou hhave ssaid it!" Mrs. Which's voice rang out. "Itt iss Eevill. Itt iss thee Ppowers of Ddarrkknness!"
 "But what's going to happen?" Meg's voice trembled.
 "Oh please, Mrs. Which, tell us what's going to happen!"
 "Wee wwill cconnttinue tto ffighht!"

Something in Mrs. Which's voice made all three of the children stand straighter, throwing back their shoulders with determination, looking at the glimmer that was Mrs. Which with pride and confidence.

"And we're not alone, you know, children," came Mrs. Whatsit, the comforter. "All through the universe it's being fought, all through the cosmos, and my, but it's a grand and exciting battle."⁵

I said that this passage inspired the work of Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In a sermon Dr. King delivered in Montgomery, Alabama in the aftermath of the bus boycott, he said,

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up.⁶

In a world filled with violence and evil, Jesus teaches us how to resist. To witness to a better way than cycles of violence and retribution. To pray our way into loving more than just the people who are like us. To pray even for our enemies.

To be creative in standing up to violence and to stand up for those who have little power.

Let us be brave. Let us be agents of love in the battle against evil. Let us be

faithful. Let us show and tell and sing and pray the good news that love is love is love is love.

May it be so. Amen.

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- ¹ Matthew Myer Boulton in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1 – Advent Through Transfiguration, David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 383. This article is about the parallel gospel passage found in Matthew.
 - ² Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, delivered a speech, "Turning the Other Cheek and Nonviolence: King, Gandhi, and Jesus' Third Way" delivered on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan, <http://www.carlylestewart.com/turning-the-other-cheek-and-nonviolence-king-gandhi-and-jesus-third-way/#.WKjjoH9R8y0>
 - ³ Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2003) 151-153. While Carter is writing about the Gospel of Matthew, the teachings apply to this parallel passage in Luke.
 - ⁴ <http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right> See also a great youtube animated video with Julio Diaz telling the story at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oOpsfbjIA>
 - ⁵ Madeleine L'Engle, A Wrinkle In Time (New York, A Dell Yearling Book, 1962) 88.
 - ⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr, "Loving Your Enemies," sermon included in his book Strength to Love (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981) 54.