“Turn the Other Cheek?”

A sermon by Rev. Rachel Wildman

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Scripture: Matt 5:38-48

Turn the other cheek. We say this all the time, don’t we? When someone throws a passive-aggressive insult our way at a meeting, and we tense, as if to throw one right back, a colleague next to us whispers, “Turn the other cheek.” When someone cuts us off in traffic and we feel your our press harder on the accelerator, a little voice in our head reminds us, “turn the other cheek.”

We say this so much that it is now absorbed into our collective psyche as *the* standard of ethical behavior, communicating the value of peace over confrontation. It is noble and self-sacrificing. Turning the other cheek is the higher ground.

I first sat with this passage immediately after listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates read his own book, “Between the World and Me,”[[1]](#footnote-1) the book that our Oppression Awareness and Action Ministry discussed this past Wednesday evening. “Between the World and Me” is a memoir, written as a letter by Coates to his teenage son. Coates is black, and his letter is fatherly advice, of a sort, regarding how to live as a black person in a racist homeland.

I really struggled with Jesus’ words after listening to Coates. Like REALLY struggled. Is PEACE really what each party finds?

Coates talks of racism, in all its forms, as a visceral—a physical, bodily—experience. I didn’t quite understand what he meant, until he elaborated a bit. Police brutality is, of course, a physical attack on the bodies of black people. But, he argues, limited access to good education is just as much an attack on the bodies of black people through the poverty into which it plunges its victims—a body made to go hungry is a body physically attacked— a body forced to breathe in air heavy with pollutants because of the bus depot down the street is a body physically attacked--a body living in the violent peril of gang-controlled neighborhoods is a body physically attacked.

It is living in this reality of the bodily assaults of racism as a teen and our culture’s understanding of Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek that made it really hard for Coates to identify with the nonviolent resistance arm of the civil rights movement.

For Coates, “turn the other cheek” was not an invitation to be perfect as Jesus says—or WHOLE, as it is perhaps better translated-- it was an act of aggression towards his own body. Turning the other cheek was tantamount to saying that a black body was not the equal of the white body who figuratively, or literally, lashed out. What Coates heard Jesus saying is “you and your family and your friends, you are not as important.”

I know from my own experiences that is what I often heard Jesus saying to me as the “turn the other cheek” would be whispered into my ear. “You are less important.”

Think back for a second. Can you remember being a kid—some kid, often a brother or sister, wrenches a toy or a piece of candy out of your hand and then knocks you onto the ground as they leave. That desire to just clobber them is instantaneous and takes over your whole body—I am just as important as you!!! it shouts out. And the adult around grabs you and says, “no…stay here. The best thing to do is to ignore them…turn the other cheek.” And what you feel is that you are less important—your body, your stuff, can just be used at the whim of another.

This, it seems to me, is what Coates describes feeling.

PAUSE

Well, “You are less important” can’t be what Jesus intended us to hear.

Think of the context in which Jesus makes this statement. It’s part of his Sermon on the Mount—his extended dialogue on how to live as a community of love. Confirming oppressive power structures is not at all what he intended in his request that we “do not resist evildoers,” and instead, “turn the other cheek.”

Think of his entire ministry—he is just not about maintaining the status quo, nor fearful of plunging a culture into chaos. “Turn the other cheek” simply cannot be intended to maintain calm for calm’s sake.

Scholarship agrees that this axiom was not at all intended to inhibit overturning the oppressive power structures of his day, or any day. Nor was it intended to be applied when our lives or safety are in jeopardy.

So, what DID Jesus intend to communicate?

Well, as with many Gospel passages, there are many possibilities. This passage is a bit like a parable—it is something to chew on…argue with…wonder about….and within it there are many different ways to hear God’s liberating Good News.

In contemplating my own aggressive or dismissive actions I have come to realize that when I have thrown the initial strike, it is because *I* have been feeling unimportant. It is my OWN feeling of being less than that is at the heart of my desire to make another feel less than.

I can’t help but imagine that this is true for most of us..and for most of “our enemies” as well.

And so it is a perpetual tail spin….each of us asserting our importance by diminishing the other....neither’s participation ever leading either of us to see our own worth or that of the other. The equality we hope to achieve in it remains ever elusive.

Watching us go at each other, around and around endlessly, I hear Jesus inviting us to STOP. “Do not resist.” Just STOP. Be CERTAIN… as your Heavenly Father is CERTAIN…that you—each of you—is important…Whether you are throwing the punch or receiving it…BE CERTAIN of this: your worth is an inviolable truth.

Just STOP. Find that place of certainty that God has planted and tended in you, and turn the other cheek.”

Why turn the other cheek? Why not just walk away, certain in our worth?

Because making ourselves vulnerable to another is a profound act of love. The trust inherent in it is a powerful affirmation for the one to whom you offer yourself. Turning the other cheek is not meek and passive—turning the other cheek is a liberating act of God.

Turn the other cheek…open your arms…give up your garments…hand over your money…share yourself to the point of being vulnerable...Turn the other cheek, for you are SO IMPORANT, in fact, that YOU, YOU in one seemingly passive act, can communicate the loud certainty of God’s love--even to those who fear more deeply than you, that they aren’t important.

Think about turning the other cheek—you are close enough to someone that they can slap your cheek and you remain in that space with them…Still so close, and rather than back away, you turn your cheek. This is *not* meek. This takes….GUTS. This takes the certain knowledge of your own dignity.

As I was prepping for my sermon this week, someone sent me a blog by a pastor who recounted a story his seminary professor had told him. I share it[[2]](#footnote-2) with you now as an illustration of the transforming power of turning the other cheek.

This is a story about a black minister named James Lawson, who was instrumental in the Nashville “sit-in” movement in 1960, training young black activists how not to respond to the hostility heaped at them. He was in the streets at a protest one afternoon where he was “approached by an onlooker who screamed a racial slur and spit in his face.”

Most of us think that Lawson has two possible reactions to choose from here. Fight back, or sit stoically, knowing that you are better than that. But Rev. Lawson? He actually does neither. Because neither of those responses acknowledges the humanity…the innate dignity…of himself, or the man who spat on him.

“Rev. Lawson, keeping calm, simply asked the man if he happened to have a handkerchief he could borrow. The man, surprised by the response, quickly gave him the one in his pocket. At that point, Lawson noticed the motorcycle nearby, and asked if it was his. The next five minutes they conversed about bikes, mechanics, and horsepower. By the end of the conversation, the man asked if there was anything the activists needed.”

Lawson, so very certain of his own worth—the importance of his own black body and perspective…did not resist, and turned the other cheek…He opened his arms wide and asked his “enemy” for what he needed at that particular moment—a handkerchief. So disarming was this vulnerability that the two came to engage one another as full, human people worthy of dignified interest. By the end of only a few minutes, the enemy had become a friend…and not just a friend of Rev. Lawson, but a friend of justice. This man was now working as the Body of Christ…doing Christ’s own work.

One of our jobs in bringing the kingdom to fruition is to communicate as clearly and widely and convincingly as we can, this truth—that each of us as a child of God, so very loved by God, is, without argument astoundingly important. Important for no other reason than we are made in the image of our God, and important because when we come to finally see that and claim that, we become instruments of God’s liberation.

So, let each of us, when our safety is not in jeopardy, NOT RESIST, but stop. And be so centered in our own beautiful worth that we make the liberating action of turning the other cheek.

AMEN.

1. Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me.* Spiegel and Grau, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eric Paul (Missionary and Pastor). <http://www.aplainaccount.org/epiphany-7a-gospel> Accessed 2/15/2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)