

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 5:38-48

Title: "Who are you? Go beyond!"

Junior high school can be a challenging time for anyone. Children begin transitioning to adulthood, often challenging parents in order to form their own identity. Hormones changing bodies and voices and behaviors. When I was doing youth work fulltime, I found junior high students to be a bit squirrely, but that's also what I loved about them.

When I was in junior high, I had an enemy. Jim was a kid who rubbed me the wrong way, and I on my part did the same for him. The dislike was obvious and we found ourselves frequently in conflict. We were both just after each other. What the issues were I can't remember but one afternoon it came to a head and we decided it was time to have it out. So, in the style of the old west we agreed on a place and a time to meet for our dual.

The appointed time came. Each of us walked out on the grassy field near the school at the end of the recreation period. He had his supporters. I had mine. They all gathered around in a circle which then defined our fighting area as we stood facing each other acting tough. The truth is that we were both afraid. We stared each other down and began walking with sidesteps. Circling. Circling. Neither of us wanted to take the first swing, so we kept circling, just staring at each other with our fists up. I really don't remember the sequence very well, but I think he took a poke at me at which point I grabbed him, wrestled him to the ground. He curled up in a fetal position with his hands behind the back of his head. I wasn't sure what to do. But the crowd was screaming, "Hit him! Hit him!" So I obliged them by weakly shoving my fist toward his stomach – really more of a push than a hit. I did this three or four times as Jim lay there succumbing to tears.

In all of about 20 seconds I was declared the winner, the crowd cheering—at least that's what I remember. Jim was left alone lying on the grass, crying.

We all went to class where I knew I would meet this girl in whom I was interested. She came in. Sat down behind me in her appointed seat. I asked her if she'd heard the news. "Yep!" she said, "That's the dumbest thing. I've never understood why boys fight."

Then, my opponent came meekly through the door, eyes red and puffed, making his way to his desk. Sherry left her seat behind me, sat next to him and began talking with him.

It was a crushing blow to an adolescent whose veins were pumping with testosterone. Yet, this girl's action was an indictment on my shallow understanding of power. Power, I thought, meant having the ability to overcome someone else with physical strength or the

willingness to threaten to do so. It seems quite clear that it is often the predominant definition offered by the human race. It is still in large part a definition nurtured in our world. Watch the movie Avatar and many others that have a theme of violence as power. Check out a hockey game—although they are better than they used to be--or watch a mixed martial arts fight. Pay attention to terrorists or the misuse of guns in random acts of violence or even in the use of military forces. Using physical violence as an expression of power is still very much a part of our species' understanding of power. We can succumb to it on a personal level, and we can succumb to it on an international level. The impulse to respond with violence is very, very powerful.

That is why these Gospel teachings of Jesus are difficult. When we hear them read or read them ourselves, they tend to fly through the mind because if we pondered their implications, we may find ourselves wondering along with Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Professor of Christian Ethics who taught at Union Theological Seminary, if it was possible that Jesus was mad as some had suggested. Or did he really mean that it was possible for these teachings to be a way of life? Could he truly mean for us to turn cheeks in the face of violence, to go further, to give more than we are obligated to give? Does Jesus really mean for us to go beyond what our culture expects?

The problem with this whole idea of cheek turning that Jesus teaches is that human beings have generally practiced the notion that violence is ultimately the best way to fight evil, to oppose any foe. It is the surest way to retributive justice. Violence works, we have been led to believe.

Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, they sought to gain military superiority, so we added more to our arsenal. As our arsenal grew, our enemy felt further threatened and increased their weapons production. That escalating spiral continued for over 40 years, leaving one country in economic ruin and another the largest debtor nation in the world.

Obviously the dynamics are more complicated on an international level than they are on the level of the playground. And I am no expert on international affairs. I'm merely suggesting that violence or the threat of violence leaves none of us -- the victor, the vanquished, or the spectators--the winner. There are always terrible losses with violence no matter who claims the winner's circle.

Jesus offered another way of combating those who would dominate other than considering violent retribution. I need to qualify all of this by telling you that this is one of those teachings of Jesus with which I struggle. I can imagine situations in which I would find it impossible to be faithful to this teaching in a literal way: someone attacking a member of my family, for example. So I find it difficult to proclaim non-violence as a law to be obeyed at all costs. IN other words, I do not think of myself as a complete pacifist—full disclosure.

Non-violence is, however, modelled in Jesus whom we follow as Matthew records Jesus' teaching: "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;" I'd like to have a couple of volunteers come and help me with a quick demonstration.

Now, notice that Jesus is specific about which cheek is slapped: the right one. So if you were to slap him on the right cheek which hand would you have to use? Your left. But you couldn't use your left because in the right-handed world of Jesus day the left hand was used for what do you think? To clean yourself which was considered an unclean act. So people did not use the left hand for slapping. Now if you could only use your right hand to slap him, how

would you do it?

It would be with the back of the hand. In the first century, slapping with the back of the hand was a form of discipline used when one person was considered inferior to the other—a subordinate. So a husband could slap his wife; parents their children; men, women; Romans, Jews without punishment of any sort.

Now, pretend you've just struck him on the right cheek. Jesus suggests you turn your other cheek to the aggressor. Since he's turned his cheek what is he inviting you to do? Hit him again. But if you were to do that with your right hand, how would you do it? It wouldn't be a backhand would it? You'd have to hit him with the open palm. To slap with the palm of the right hand, however, was a sign of challenge to an opponent thought worthy of respect. In other words, by turning the cheek the victim is saying: "I refuse to be humiliated by you. In fact, I challenge you to strike me again. I'm a human being just like you. You cannot demean me."

It was a nonviolent way to oppose one who would dominate, who thought he had the power to control you. Thanks for your help with the demonstration.

The civil rights movement, led by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was filled with examples of turning cheeks.

Robert Coles is a professor emeritus of Psychiatry associated with Harvard University. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his work with children in crisis. His classroom in the 1960's consisted of situations in which children were caught in the midst of this country's civil rights struggle. Ruby Bridges was one 6 year old whom Coles studied. When the Supreme Court ordered desegregation across the country, Ruby lived with her parents and siblings in New Orleans. Her father was a gas station attendant. Her mother worked nights at various jobs. Ruby was only one of 6 children who passed a test designed to keep black children out of white schools and so she was to be one of the first children in the country to initiate desegregation in the schools there.

For days and then months, she faced fearful mobs who lined the sidewalk entrance to the school as she entered and then again when she left. Federal marshals surrounded her on her arrival and on her departure each day. Voices from the crowds threatened to hang her or poison her. One day someone brought a black doll shoved into a coffin. For the better part of a year she was in school alone because white parents boycotted the school in response to the order.

As a child psychiatrist, Coles was interested in how this child was holding up under this extreme pressure, so he began to try to understand what held her together. He talked with Ruby's teacher who described one day:

"I was standing in the classroom [one day], looking out the window, and I saw Ruby coming down the street, with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there, shouting, as usual. A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiles at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob, every night before she goes to sleep!"

Coles was convinced that this child would somehow crack under the pressure, that she was repressing her trauma. He told Ruby what he'd heard from the teacher and asked if it was true: "Yes, I do pray for them." "I asked her why?" Coles said. "Because." Nothing further.

He asked again and said he was curious about why she would want to pray for people who were being so verbally violent and nasty to her. "I go to church," she told him, "every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do."

Now, I don't know if violence is always wrong for every situation. Jesus seems to be saying that, and it's hard to argue with one who willingly gave his life when he could have engaged in armed revolt, a man who became Savior by living his admonition to love enemies and pray for those who persecute you. But I do know what it felt like to see someone who could have been my friend left alone crying on a playground because of senseless violence. I know what it is like to witness one more sensitive and wiser and Christ-like than me who went to his aid. I know how foolish it looks when a professional athlete loses control on a basketball court or some other court attacks another player. I know how painful it is to watch two great nations injured by reciprocated threats of violence through decades of fear and suspicion, how much tension is created around the world whenever groups of people engage in violence or the threat of violence. We all know how religious extremists use violence to instill fear—or at least try to do so—and how impossible it is to understand. But I also know how inspiring it is to hear of a child who simply lived out Jesus' teaching: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." A little child who embodied the prophet Isaiah's dream of the peaceful kingdom:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling
together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

So what do you make of Jesus' teachings of going beyond what our culture says we should do, how our species suggests we should behave in response to aggressors? How do Jesus' teachings impact your behavior, your way of living in this world? Will you go to infinity and beyond in the way of Jesus?