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7th Sunday of Year A Mt 5:38-48

We live in violent times, as is evident on every level, from the international to the interpersonal. So, what are we to do about it? If we return violence with violence, then we run the risk of becoming just like our opponents. If we do nothing, then we appear passive, a patsy, a pushover. How do we make sense of the words of Jesus in today's Gospel? How do we understand figures of speech written in another language, 2,000 years ago, in a land 6,000 miles away, and in a culture so different from our own? Too often we have taken the commands to "turn the other cheek," to "go the extra mile," and ripped them out of the cultural context in which Jesus first spoke them, interpreting them in a way that has no reference to setting, time or history.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say, "Offer no resistance to one who is evil." The word "resist" is the same word used to describe the violent clash of armies on the battlefield. Jesus is saying do not meet violence with violence, but that doesn't mean we should be doormats either. The usual response to violence is fight or flight. One either attacks the aggressor, or one runs away, avoiding confrontation. But if we listen carefully to the examples Jesus gives of dealing with violence, we will see there is a third way---a way that confronts, challenges, and engages the aggressor, but in such a manner that it turns the violence against the aggressor without increasing that violence.

Now let's examine briefly each of those three examples in turn. Jesus says "When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other as well." Jesus' listeners assumed that if someone were going to strike another, he would use his right hand. So, if the attacker hits someone whom he is facing on the right cheek, he will have to use the back of his hand. That is the way one treats an inferior, the way a master treats slave or the way a Roman treats a Jew. Besides being an act of violence, that slap is also an insult; the gesture is intended to humiliate the person. So, if one being attacked offers his other cheek, the left cheek, the aggressor, still facing that person, would now have to strike him with an open (right) hand. In that way the victim, looking the aggressor straight in the eyes, is asserting his human dignity; he is presenting himself as an equal. If one hit an equal, the one hitting would be subject to a fine. The point was to find a way to beat the aggressor at his own game; we might say "to push the envelope"--to make clear to the aggressor that if the unjust or demeaning behavior continues, there can be negative consequences for the aggressor.

Jesus says, "If anyone wants to go to court with you over your outer garment,

hand over your inner one as well.” The law provided that if a man borrowed some money, the borrower would have to leave his outer garment as security, as collateral, with the lender. But at the end of the day the lender had to return that outer garment to him. Otherwise the man would have nothing else to keep him warm during the night. Then in the morning, the lender might come and make a big show of taking back the outer garment, thus making a spectacle of the poor man's indebtedness and humiliating him again. However, in the culture of that time, it was considered more shameful to cause someone to be naked than to be naked. So Jesus says, in so many words, if someone humiliates you by making a big show of your indebtedness, give him all your clothing and stand there naked before him. And the shame of your nakedness falls on him, the one who caused you to be naked, not on you. The aggressor is shamed, not the victim.

And finally we hear Jesus say, “Should anyone pressure you into service for one mile, go for two miles.” A Roman soldier had the right to force a Jew to carry his pack (about 70 pounds) for one mile, but one mile only and no further. If he were caught forcing someone to go further, that soldier could be severely punished. And, the Roman roads were clearly marked every mile; one knew exactly the distance one had walked. So, Jesus says if some soldier forces you to carry his gear, do it but just keep on walking, and then that puts the soldier in the ridiculous position of having to beg you to give him back his pack, so that he won't get into trouble with his commanding officer. It is said that humor doesn't travel well, but here we can sense that Jesus has a sense of humor. Imagine, He says, what it will be like when you are going the extra mile and the soldier has to plead with you to stop, so that he doesn't get into trouble. (Who will have the last laugh then?)

In these three examples Jesus gives regarding how to dealing with violence inflicted upon a person, we see that He is not simply asking us to stand there and take whatever is thrown at us. Our usual response to violence is to react, and return like for like. We operate from the aggression-based, reptilian part of our brain and lash out against the aggressor. Instead, Jesus asks us to respond, and not simply react; to use the frontal lobes of our brain: to use our creativity, our imagination, our ingenuity, to confront, challenge and engage the aggressor; to try to find a way that will defuse the situation, rather than escalate the tension in the usual spiral of recrimination and revenge. Of course, there are no guarantees that this will always work, but as followers of Jesus we are called to look for those opportunities to add something new to the mix, instead of the usual pattern of charge and counter-charge, of attack and counterattack.

Jesus is asking of us something different than simply being “nice” to people who

want to take advantage of us. "Being nice" is not a Christian virtue. In the Sermon on the Mount, there is no Beatitude that says, "Blessed are those who are nice, because then everyone will like you; then you'll be popular." Being nice is not a Christian virtue—it is simply a strategy for self-survival, for self-preservation, trying to fit into the group, hoping that a happy face will eventually win everyone over. But doing nothing, just trying to keep one's head down, trying to fit in to what is essentially a toxic situation, will only allow the poison, the venom, the cruelty that is at work there to eat away at one's insides, at one's very self-respect, to destroy that individual in the end. As Christians, we are not called to be "nice," but to be peacemakers—to confront violence, but in a nonviolent manner, in a way that just doesn't add more fuel to the fire. That is the only way to check the escalating cycles of violence that have plagued our world.

In the three examples Jesus gave about confronting violence, in each one He presents a strategy for the individual to stand up for his or her own human dignity, and not to be cowed, not to be intimidated by the violence of the aggressor, lest one be diminished in one's worth as a human being. We are told we should stand up for ourselves, and for others, in protecting every person's dignity. It is never a matter of just being a doormat, a pushover, a patsy. It is to have respect for oneself and for others.

Let us pray that we can be creative, ingenious and constructive; that we can find ways to wage peace while others are all about waging war; that we can take the third way of Jesus—not fight, nor flight, but striving always to assert the dignity of every human being in a peaceful, nonviolent manner.