

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
February 20, 2022, 5:45 p.m.
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 can suffer the same fate. Because we do not know the context, the audience, or the language in which Jesus' words were first spoken, we may interpret them in a way much different than the way He intended. So, it is with the examples Jesus gives us in today's gospel—of turning the other cheek and of giving up one's tunic, one's inner garment, i.e., one's underwear. The way that we may 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. Instead of advising us how to assert our human dignity, they seem to be doing the very opposite—at best encouraging us to be the target for another's violence and aggression.

So, what is going on here? In both of the examples Jesus offers, it is a case of a person in a position of power taking advantage of one less powerful. 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. By striking an "inferior" with his left hand, besides inflicting pain, the aggressor would also be asserting his superiority. If the victim of the attack 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 presenting himself as an inferior to the aggressor, 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 and his inner garment, as well. That would render him naked. In Jewish law it was considered a great injustice to humiliate someone to that extent. By offering both his inner and outer garment, the individual is challenging his aggressor to act more fairly.

In both examples Jesus presents individuals who are the objects of someone's hostility. Jesus does not advise them, us, to be passive victims, but neither should we respond to violence with violence. We are, first of all, not to let the aggressors "get" to us, to "run" us, to "push our buttons," but to try to turn the hostile situation around so that we are good to them, because that is how God is good to us, even when we are hostile to God and to the ones whom God loves, viz., our fellow human beings. We are to use our imagination; we are advised to be quick-witted in finding a way to assert our human dignity in the face of aggression. We are to situate ourselves within the ambiance of God's forgiving mercy, rather than operate from society's starting point of giving back "tit for tat."

How do we avoid the trap of giving back 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, we are told 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.

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...Forgive and you will be forgiven." In forgiveness, there are two beneficiaries--the person forgiven and the one who forgives. To forgive is not to excuse or condone. If, for instance, it is a crime that has been committed, justice may have to be served to preserve the welfare of the community at large—but even here justice, tempered with mercy. Forgiveness provides the opportunity for a new future to be played out, and not have the past be repeated over and over again. The one who forgives also benefits, especially if the offender is no longer around. The one who forgives is able to let go of the grudges from the past, and not hold onto them like a dog holds onto its favorite bone. The injured person is then freed of the animosity that may be eating away at them.

Jesus gives the reason why we should act this way. 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 centered awareness of love and mercy; 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, escalating a little each time. That is the real power our enemies have over us—to make us like themselves.

We can act differently. We can stop judging and then Jesus says, 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 continually targeting others with our judgments, we are at the same time feeding our severe inner-critic, the voice within that demands we too 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 refraining from judging, but again 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.

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.