

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
7 Epiphany A
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The Third Way

“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ‘If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.’”

We've been talking these last several weeks about the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' grand vision for living in love, for reaching beyond the law and exceeding righteousness. But this is too much, right? Love your enemies? That's a bridge too far.

The problem we have with this passage is that it sounds like weakness. It seems to encourage submission when we should be fighting back. But several decades ago a theologian named Walter Wink studied this passage. What he found was interesting. Jewish culture in Jesus' day was right-hand dominant. You never used your left hand except for unclean tasks. So if someone hits you, they would use their right hand and strike you in the left cheek, right? But this says right cheek, which means they must have used the back of their right hand. That's the only way it would work. It was a backhanded slap, which is how you would hit someone who was inferior to you. It was a sign of condescension, the way you might treat a servant or slave.

Now, if you are that servant, what can you do? If you fight back, you'll get killed. Better to just take your slap and walk away. Or, you could do the unexpected. You could turn the other cheek, daring the person to hit you with a normal punch. Daring them, in other words, to treat you as an equal. Do you follow me? That's not submissive at all. It's bold. And the next two examples are the same. If someone takes you to court and sues you for all your possessions, even the coat on your back, don't stop there. Give them your cloak too, so that you're standing there naked in the courtroom. Imagine how uncomfortable the other person would be, how foolish they would look with you standing there boldly in front of them?

Walter Wink calls this the third way of Jesus. It's not an eye for an eye. That's an endless cycle of violence, which only deepens division and fear. But it's not weakness either, far from it. It's responding to violence with courage and conviction. It's an act of defiance that upsets the balance of power and demands reflection. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says love your enemies. Love them enough to hold before them a mirror, that

they might see the gap between their actions and God's vision of love. This passage is the blueprint for creative resistance, the foundation of the Civil Rights movement. It's not about violence and it's not about submission; it's about disruption – the disruptive power of love. Sure, there are times when we have no choice; we have to flee or we have to fight. Sometimes those are the only safe or moral options. But most of the time, there is another way. We can live differently – as individuals, as communities, as a country. We can change hearts and minds and laws if we are daring enough to choose love.

In 1969, a man named Fred Rogers was called before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate. President Nixon had threatened to cut funding for public broadcasting, and Mr. Rogers – as we know him – testified on behalf of his new show. At the beginning, the chairman was dismissive, but Rogers kept talking. He talked about the violent images that dominate cartoons, and the violence we see in the world around us. He explained that he tries to give kids something different. He tries to teach them to manage their feelings. And he ended with the words of a song:

What do you do with the mad that you feel? When you feel so mad you could bite. When the whole wide world seems oh so wrong, and nothing you do seems right. What do you do? Do you punch a bag? Do you pound some clay or dough? Do you round up friends for a game of tag and see how fast you go? It's great to be able to stop when you've planned the thing that's wrong, and be able to do something else instead -- and think about this song. To know that there's something deep inside that helps us become what we can. For a girl can be someday a lady, and a boy can be someday a man.'

Today, we baptize a sweet boy, MJ Benson. He's the youngest of four and the son of an athletic director, so no doubt he'll be tough. He's got pretty tough and awesome older sisters. But my prayer for MJ, for his sisters, my prayer for my own kids and all the kids in our church, is that they would grow to know that the world is not divided into the strong and the weak. It's not all a choice between friends and enemies. We don't have to live that way. Instead, every day we can choose the disruptive power of love. There is no other power so strong in the world as God's grace, which binds us together, if only we are bold enough to stand in the face of fear and choose love. Amen.