



THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

FEBRUARY 24, 2019

MATTHEW 5: 38-42

“DO NOT LET YOURSELF BE HUMILIATED”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

- JACK BENNY IS CREDITED WITH THE JOKE: “HOW DO YOU GET TO CARNEGIE HALL?”
- “PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.”
- AND THAT’S WHAT ANY OF US DO IF WE ARE GOING TO COME CLOSE TO MASTERING ANYTHING.
- SUPPOSEDLY IT TAKES 10,000 HOURS OF PRACTICE TO BECOME ACCOMPLISHED AT A SKILL OR PROFESSION.
- I DIDN’T PRACTICE PIANO WITH ANY SERIOUSNESS, SO I AM A MIDDLING TO FAIR PIANIST. ON THE OTHER HAND, MY SISTER PRACTICED HER FLUTE THREE OR FOUR HOURS A DAY SINCE ABOUT SEVENTH GRADE, SO SHE HAS SPENT HER ENTIRE ADULT LIFE PLAYING IN ORCHESTRAS IN GERMANY.
- IT’S A BIT PUZZLING BUT, FOR THE MOST PART, CHRISTIANITY HAS NOT BEEN AS CONCERNED ABOUT RIGHT PRACTICE AS IT HAS WITH RIGHT BELIEF.
- RIGHT BELIEF IS CALLED ORTHODOXY. AND SO, THE LUTHERAN CHURCH CAN DELINEATE RIGHT LUTHERAN BELIEF. THERODORE ROOSEVELT ONCE SAID THAT IF LUTHERANS COULD STOP FIGHTING ABOUT RIGHT BELIEF

AMONG THEMSELVES THEY COULD BECOME THE MOST POWERFUL AGENT FOR GOOD IN THE UNITED STATES. BUT WE CAN'T, SO WE HAVEN'T.

- BUT THIS MORNING I WANT TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT ORTHOPRAXY, MEANING RIGHT PRACTICE.
- FOLLOWING JACK BENNY, WE MIGHT ASK, "HOW DO WE BECOME A WISE SPIRITUAL PERSON?"
- "PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE...."
- IF YOU WERE HERE LAST SUNDAY, YOU HEARD JESUS BLESS THE POOR, THE HUNGRY, AND THE POWERLESS. YOU HEARD JESUS SOUND A WARNING TO THE RICH, THE WELL FED, AND THE POWERFUL.
- THE OBVIOUS QUESTION, THEN, IS HOW ARE THE POOR, HUNGRY, AND POWERLESS SUPPOSED TO AVOID BEING COMPLETELY DOMINATED BY THE RICH, WELL FED, AND POWERFUL?
- AND JESUS' PRACTICE IS BRILLIANT, SUBVERSIVE, AND NON-VIOLENT.
- THAT'S A POWERFUL COMBINATION: BRILLIANCE, SUBVERSION, AND NON-VIOLENCE.
- JESUS FIRST SAYS, "DO NOT RESIST AN EVILDOER. IF ANYONE STRIKES YOU ON THE RIGHT CHEEK, TURN THE OTHER ALSO."
- WHY THE RIGHT CHEEK?
- A RIGHT FIST WOULD LAND ON THE LEFT CHEEK OF THE OPPONENT. AN OPEN-HANDED SLAP WOULD ALSO LAND ON THE LEFT CHEEK.
- THE ONLY WAY I CAN NATURALLY STRIKE THE RIGHT CHEEK WITH MY RIGHT HAND IS WITH A BACKHAND SLAP. SO, JESUS IS NOT REFERRING TO A FIGHT BETWEEN TWO EQUALS. THIS IS ONE PERSON ATTEMPTING TO INSULT AND HUMILIATE ANOTHER PERSON.

- IN JESUS' DAY, A BACKHAND SLAP WAS THE USUAL WAY OF TREATING INFERIORS. MASTERS BACKHANDED SLAVES. HUSBANDS BACKHANDED WIVES. PARENTS BACKHANDED CHILDREN. MEN BACKHANDED WOMEN. ROMANS BACKHANDED JEWS.
- THIS IS A CONTEXT OF UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN WHICH TO RETALIATE WOULD BE TO ONLY INVITE MORE ABUSE.
- THE OTHER DETAIL WE NEED TO KNOW IS THAT THE LEFT HAND WAS USED ONLY FOR UNCLEAN TASKS. YOU WITH ME HERE?
- SOME STRAINS OF THE JEWISH RELIGION EVEN HAD TEN-DAY PUNISHMENTS FOR EVEN GESTURING WITH THE LEFT HAND.
- SO RIGHT HAND TO RIGHT CHEEK WITH A BACKHAND SLAP. SUPERIOR TO INFERIOR. POWER TO POWERLESSNESS....
- JESUS' LISTENERS ARE PEOPLE SUBJECTED TO INDIGNITIES, FORCED TO STIFLE THEIR OUTRAGE AT THEIR CONSTANT HUMILIATION AND DEHUMANIZING TREATMENT BECAUSE THEY ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LADDER WHEN IT COMES TO CLASS, RACE, GENDER, AGE, OR SOCIAL STATUS....
- SO, LET'S TRY THIS PRACTICE OUT. I NEED A FEMALE ADULT VOLUNTEER.
- IF I STRIKE DEB ON THE RIGHT CHEEK AND SHE TURNS THE OTHER CHEEK, WHAT HAPPENS?
- IF I INSIST ON CONTINUING TO TREAT HER AS AN INFERIOR, I WOULD HAVE TO BACKHAND HER WITH MY LEFT HAND WHICH I CAN'T DO. IT IS CULTURALLY UNACCEPTABLE. I'M STYMIED.
- THE PERSON WHO TURNS THE OTHER CHEEK IS SAYING, IN EFFECT, "TRY AGAIN, BUBBA. YOUR FIRST BLOW FAILED TO HUMILIATE ME. I AM A HUMAN BEING EQUAL TO YOU. YOUR STATUS CANNOT CHANGE THIS FACT. YOU WILL NOT Demean ME."

- WE ARE LEFT, EYEBALL TO EYEBALL, WITH DEB HAVING ROBBED ME OF MY POWER TO HUMILIATE HER.
- PRETTY COOL, HUH?
- THE SECOND EXAMPLE TAKES PLACE IN COURT. A RICH MAN WAS ABLE TO TAKE A POOR PERSON IN DEBT TO COURT TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIS LAST VALUABLE ASSET: THE COAT ON HIS BACK. EVERYTHING ELSE HAS BEEN TAKEN: HIS LAND, HIS GOODS, ALL ASSETS. WE'RE NOW DOWN TO A WEALTHY LANDOWNER OR CREDITOR STOOPING TO THE FINAL PUBLIC HUMILIATING ACTION. TAKING THE OUTER GARMENT IN COURT.
- UNDER THE COAT OR OUTER GARMENT, A PERSON WORE A TUNIC OR A CLOAK. THIS WAS A THIN UNDERGARMENT, ESSENTIALLY THE FIRST STAGE IN WHAT BECAME OUR UNDERWEAR.
- SO, WHEN SOMEONE LOSES HIS COAT IN COURT, WHY DOES JESUS COUNSEL THEM TO HAND OVER THEIR TUNIC ALSO, LEAVING THEM TO MARCH OUT OF COURT STARK NAKED?
- WELL, NAKEDNESS WAS TABOO IN JUDAISM. AND SHAME FELL LESS ON THE NAKED PERSON AND MORE ON THE PERSON VIEWING OR CAUSING THE NAKEDNESS.
- JESUS AGAIN TEACHES HOW TO TURN THE TABLES IN A BRILLIANT, SUBVERSIVE, AND NONVIOLENT WAY.
- THE CREDITOR HAS THE LAW ENTIRELY IN HIS FAVOR. HE LEGALLY CAN TAKE THE COAT OFF SOMEONE'S BACK. BUT THE POOR MAN TRANSCENDS THIS ATTEMPT TO HUMILIATE HIM PUBLICLY.
- THE CREDITOR IS LEFT HOLDING THE COAT AND UNDERGARMENT WHILE THE POOR MAN MARCHES OUT OF THE COURTROOM BUCK NAKED!
- THE CREDITOR IS REVEALED NOT TO BE A LEGITIMATE MONEYLENDER BUT A PARTY TO THE DESTRUCTION OF AN ENTIRE SOCIAL CLASS TO

LANDLESSNESS, DESTITUTION, AND HUMILIATION. THIS UNMASKING OF THE SYSTEM MAY ALLOW THE CREDITOR TO SEE FOR THE FIRST TIME WHAT HIS PRACTICES CAUSE AND OFFERS HIM THE POSSIBILITY OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION.

- JESUS PROVIDES A TANTALIZING HINT OF HOW TO TAKE ON AN ENTIRE SYSTEM BY UNMASKING ITS ESSENTIAL CRUELTY AND MAKING FUN OF ITS PRETENSIONS TO JUSTICE. THE POOR MAN REFUSES TO ROLL OVER AND TAKE IT. HE ACCEPTS THE LAW, PUSHES IT TO THE POINT OF ABSURDITY, AND WALKS OUT TO THE LAUGHTER OF ALL THOSE AROUND HIM.
- PRETTY COOL, HUH?
- FINALLY, WE HAVE JESUS' ADMONITION THAT "IF ONE OF THE OCCUPATION TROOPS FORCES YOU TO CARRY HIS PACK ONE MILE, CARRY IT TWO MILES."
- ROMAN LAW STATED THAT A ROMAN SOLDIER COULD COMPEL A JEW TO CARRY HIS PACK ONE MILE, BUT NO FURTHER.
- FOR THE JEWS, THIS FORCED LABOR WAS CONSIDERED TO BE "LIKE DEATH." ANY JEW AT ANY TIME COULD BE GRABBED AND MADE TO CARRY THE SOLDIER'S PACK FOR ONE MILE, BUT ONLY ONE MILE.
- IF SO, WHY DOES JESUS SAY TO CARRY THE PACK A SECOND MILE?
- AS IN THE PREVIOUS TWO EXAMPLES, THE ISSUE IS HOW CAN THE OPPRESSED RECOVER THE INITIATIVE AND ASSERT THEIR HUMAN DIGNITY IN A SITUATION THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED. IN THIS CASE, THE LAW IS THE LAW.
- IMAGINE A ROMAN SOLDIER, COMING TO THE END OF THE MILE MARKER AND REACHING OUT FOR HIS PACK. INSTEAD OF THE OPPRESSED PERSON SULLENLY HANDING BACK THE PACK, HE DOES NOT STOP MARCHING FORWARD.

- FROM A SITUATION OF FORCED LABOR, THE OPPRESSED HAVE SUDDENLY SEIZED THE INITIATIVE. THEY HAVE TAKEN BACK THE POWER OF CHOICE. THE SOLDIER IS THROWN OFF BALANCE AS HE TRIES TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO. TRUDGE ALONGSIDE. BEG FOR HIS PACK BACK? GET INTO A TUG-OF-WAR SO HE CAN CARRY HIS OWN PACK?
- THE SOLDIER MIGHT EVEN GET IN TROUBLE BECAUSE HE IS VIOLATING THE LAW OF ONLY ONE MILE!
- THE ABSURDITY OF THIS SCENE ESCAPES US, BUT IT WOULD NOT HAVE ESCAPED JESUS' HEARERS. THEY WOULD HAVE DELIGHTED AT THE PROSPECT OF BEFUDDLING THEIR OPPRESSORS.
- PRTTY COOL, HUH?
- JESUS IS HELPING AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE FIND A WAY TO PROTEST AND NEUTRALIZE THEIR OPPONENT. JESUS IS NOT SOME OTHER-WORLDFLY MESSIAH, BUT A DOWN-TO-EARTH WISE TEACHER FORMULATING A SUBVERSIVE SPIRITUALITY IN WHICH PEOPLE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SOCIAL LADDER LEARN TO RECOVER THEIR HUMAN DIGNITY....
- A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTOR TO DEPRESSION IS BEING IN A SITUATION THAT LEAVES US HELPLESS, HOPELESS, AND POWERLESS. A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTOR TO ANXIETY IS NOT HAVING ACCESS TO RESOURCES THAT FREE US FROM TRAUMATIC, OPPRESSIVE, OR HUMILIATING EXPERIENCES.
- THE CHURCH, IN ITS EARLY ALIGNMENT WITH THE RICH AND POWERFUL, LOST TOUCH WITH THE SPIRITUAL GENIUS OF ITS FOUNDER.
- "TURN THE OTHER CHEEK" BECAME A PIOUS INJUNCTION TO KEEP TAKING ABUSE IN THE NAME OF JESUS BECAUSE SOMEHOW IT WILL BENEFIT SOMEONE. CHRISTIAN BECOMES JUST ANOTHER NAME FOR WELCOME MAT.

- NOT “TURN THE OTHER CHEEK” TO HUMILIATE THE HUMILIATOR. SHAME THE SHAMER. DON’T ACCEPT THE WRONG, BUT EXPOSE THE WRONG.
- GIVE HIM YOUR CLOAK BECAME ANOTHER PIOUS INJUNCTION TO GIVE, GIVE, GIVE EVEN WHEN YOU CAN’T AFFORD TO GIVE. NOT, GIVE IN SUCH A WAY SO AS TO EXPOSE THE CRUELTY, THE VIOLENCE, AND GREED OF THE UNFAIR ECONOMIC SYSTEM.
- AND GO A SECOND MILE BECAME A CHEERLEADING CHANT TO ENCOURAGE CONTINUING ON A PATH IN THE NAME OF JESUS AND NEVER GIVING UP RATHER THAN A WAY TO RIDICULE UNFAIR LAWS AND UNFAIR ENFORCERS OF THE LAW.
- JESUS BECAME A NICE GUY TELLING US TO BE GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS WHO JUST TAKE IT. RATHER THAN A BRILLIANT, SUBVERSIVE, AND NON-VIOLENT SPIRITUAL TEACHER. POINTING US TO TAKE UP THE CROSS AND BE CREATIVE AND COOL FOLLOWERS WHO DON’T PUT UP WITH BEING DONE TO BY THE RICH AND POWERFUL.
- I DON’T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I’VE SPENT MY LIFE BEING AN OUTSIDER. AT THIS POINT, IT’S A FAIRLY COMFORTABLE SPOT. I’VE SPENT DECADES WORKING IN THERAPY WITH THOSE WHO NO LONGER WERE COMFORTABLY SUPPORTED BY THE POWERS THAT BE.
- EXCEPT FOR ONE, MY CONGREGATIONS HAVE BEEN IN RIDICULED TOWNS LIKE CHATSWORTH, ILLINOIS, FONDLY KNOWN AS CHATSWORTHLESS AND DECLINING FARM COMMUNITIES LIKE SHENANDOAH, VIRGINIA. AND NOW I FIND MYSELF AT CLC IN MILLVALE, NOT FIRST LUTHERAN DOWNTOWN OR ST. JOHN, HIGHLAND.
- **BUT WE ARE SOMEBODY.** THIS IS JESUS’ CHURCH IN MILLVALE. IT DOESN’T BELONG TO SOME CLAN OR TO CHURCH LEADERS OUTSIDE THE CONGREGATION. WE WILL FOLLOW JESUS AND HIS TEACHINGS WHEREVER THEY LEAD US.

- WE WILL NOT BE PUT DOWN, RIDICULED, OR BOW BEFORE THE POWERS THAT BE.
- WE WILL STAND TALL. BRILLIANTLY, SUBVERSIVELY, AND NON-VIOLENTLY FOLLOWERS OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT.
- SONG: LOSING MY RELIGION BY R.E.M.