

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on Matthew 5.38-48

The Sermon on the Mount reaches a climax with these teachings that most people find counter-intuitive at best, and simply wrong at worst. Yet, these verses follow logically and consistently from the vision asserted in the Beatitudes, and followed up on throughout this 5th chapter of Matthew's version of Jesus' sermon.

Yet again, we must remind ourselves that Jesus is not asking us to act this way in the context of living in the world as it is; rather he is demanding that we do all we can to oppose the world the way it is and to live 'as if' we were carrying out the vision God has for us. This means rejecting all the values of society that humans have seen as true since recorded history, and placing in their stead the values of God that will create a truly just, loving, and peaceful world where all are equals.

If we don't understand that this is Jesus' motive, we will never understand these passages that ask us to do things that we otherwise think are extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible.

It is ironic that literalists often do not deal much with these passages in which Jesus is indeed being literal. And, usually, more progressive Christians falsely assume that this is simply another metaphorical group of sayings that they spiritualize to try to not reject Jesus' words outright. If there are any words Jesus truly means just as he says them, I believe them to be these.

But, of course, we don't really want to believe that; for to do so means we have to turn our lives upside down from the way we have been living them.

For those who are familiar with the theories of nonviolence and creative resistance, or even pacifism, perhaps we can make sense of Jesus rejecting any form of violent retaliation for harms done to us. Gandhi was edified by this passage, as was M.L. King, Jr. If we all retaliated, we'd end up with a blind and toothless world; as they reminded us. Retaliation only furthers the violence. Getting even doesn't end anything. It simply perpetuates the animosity.

But not retaliating violently against an evil-doer is not the same as being passive, as both Gandhi and King reminded us. We can still take actions to shame our oppressors, and hold them to accountability should we gain the authority or power to do so. We can still nonviolently resist their oppression, call them out for it, and demand they change their ways or be seen as cruel and immoral persons who need to be replaced from their positions of power. These are strategic options for us; especially if we are not among those with the most power.

For oppressed people, creative nonviolence is perhaps the best strategic method to condemn oppressors in the eyes of the world. By not retaliating with the violence, we refuse to play the game of antagonism that they incite us to play; for if we violently resist, then they have an excuse to use still more force – and, of course, they usually have far more weapons at their disposal than do their victims. If they continue to abuse us, then they look despicable to the world for their heinous treatment of defenseless and non-retaliatory people. Gandhi was able to bring the British Empire to its knees by these methods in gaining India its independence. King made strides in the USA by using the same tactics.

But I don't think that Jesus was as much as a nonviolent "strategist" as he was a nonviolent "visionary." Even if he didn't believe his methods would work, I think he would have still kept them for their spiritual worth and moral value. For Jesus, whether the methods worked to achieve freedom, independence, less oppression, etc., these, while being important objectives, were less important than living a virtuous life and creating a virtuous society.

We underestimate Jesus' motives if we think he merely wanted the oppressed to be treated as equals in worth to others. He was a revolutionary who, as we've seen in the Beatitudes and the rest of this chapter, wanted to overthrow human empires and the values that perpetuated them, and replace them with the kingdom of God and God's values. He wanted a total and wholistic repentance of the entirety of human civilization so that there might truly be shalom, peace with justice through love, that permeates every life and every society. He didn't come to save individual souls, but to transform all humanity and the interconnected web of life.

Reciprocity and retaliation were givens in human cultures and empires. No civilization existed without these. But that is precisely what Jesus is proposing here: getting rid of these values entirely. "Do not retaliate against an evildoer," assumes, for Jesus, that we don't retaliate against anyone – for any reason. That is to buy into their world, not God's.

He states the word, "evildoer," not to limit who we can't retaliate against, but rather to shock us into seeing that he includes "evildoers" and not simply family, friends, and loved ones. Retaliation, retribution, revenge, and reciprocity need to be the values of the past, Jesus is asserting. They are to be replaced with encouragement, compassion, helpfulness, and supererogatory generosity. Obliterate the old system; install an entirely new one. Leave no trace of the old values, Jesus is proclaiming.

It is not about who is in the right and who is in the wrong. It also isn't about who has their human and civil rights violated, and who is violating them -- a very difficult thing for us to understand in our own society. Rather, it is about creating a world where: all animosity ceases, we all try to help each other out, and whenever wronged, we seek to understand and forgive when the person, or institution, has been brought to accountability. The goal is the beloved community, as King surmised. It is to be a world where we stop being vengeful, and we start helping out one another and seeking the best welfare of each and every person as we create a society of equals in worth.

Offering your cloak when they take your coat is not simply an act of embarrassing and shaming others for their evil, it is to emulate the example that nothing is mine and nothing is yours so that everyone will see that we are not in a competitive or adversarial society, but a community of genuine care for one another. If someone begs from us, we are to give freely to them; not asking whether they need it more than we do, or whether they will use it for the right purposes, but showing that we care for them enough, and trust them enough, to give to them because they think they need what we have.

Jesus was a communalist – one who believed that we should share all that we have with one another; since, after all, all is God's, and we are simply the caretakers of all that God has made. The earth has enough resources for all of our needs; though even Jesus condemned those who abused others and took away from what they needed for the sake of their own greed. We are all to share so that all persons have enough, and none far more than enough. This is what living in an egalitarian or communalistic society means. And we have Biblical evidence that this is precisely how he and his disciples lived; everyone giving all they had, and the proceeds doled out to each as each had need.

In order to become an egalitarian society, we can't wait for the powers to be to decide that this is what we need to do. Jesus was about creating a ground-up society in which we demand that the rulers, leaders, wealthy, etc., give up what they have so that everyone can have enough. Do we not remember his response to the rich man who thought he was a good person? "Go, sell all you have; give to the poor; and come and follow me."

This was Jesus' recipe for how we all should live. It was a requirement for being one of his disciples. And it was the vision he hoped would become contagious and take over the entire society and world. This was his dream; as it was the dream of the prophets before him.

But we can't expect this dream to become a reality if we don't act in the ways that will bring it about. We can't expect the rich and powerful to give up their affluence and control. We, the people, need to demand it from them, and live our own lives in accordance with a love, peace, and justice in which everyone's needs are supplied. We have to advocate for it, and work for it.

And again, whether it actually comes about because of our actions is less important than our living "as if" it will happen. By living virtuous lives in accordance with these values of God, and providing for all as each has need as God does with the sun and rain, as Jesus makes clear in this passage, we invite others to emulate what we emulate from God.

We are not to look at the world as most people look at the world; as to who is going to get the upper hand, who is going to gain and who is to lose, etc. This is not how God delivers enough to all creatures and all peoples. God wants enough for everyone. And we are to follow in the same example.

We are to love everyone, not just our neighbors and those who love us. Our enemies are included in "everyone." For when we love enemies, we no longer see them as enemies; and when we do not respond in kind with aggression towards them as they did to us, we let them know that we reject their violent ways – and that they should, too.

Turning the other cheek when they afflict us invites them to see that we reject their very framework of seeing people as needing to be opposed to one another. We make our vision of a peaceful world with no violence clear. They can accept or reject it; but they have not taunted us into their trap of inviting our retaliation so that they can justify their desire for total control over us. In turning the other cheek, we prove that they cannot control our consciences; and that our act of rebellion against their violent ways is our testimony against their lack of conscience.

Violent people only know how to get what they want through violence. By showing them another way, even when we allow them to get the upper hand over us physically, socially, politically, and economically, we testify to the truth that spiritual integrity and ethical dignity mean more to us than all the accolades of human culture and successes of hierarchical society. Refusing to play by their rules reveals we are not controlled by them. They may do whatever they want to us, but they cannot control our behavior, for our values are those of an eternal God, and not those of a transitory empire.

By loving and praying for enemies and those who persecute us, we reveal that we will not be dragged down into thinking of them as an enemy. Again, we annihilate their value system in our lives by not playing into thinking that relationships need to be oppositional; showing that we will not demean ourselves by retaliation or vengefulness, and also showing that we have found a better way to live in which we invite them into as well; despite their injustices towards us.

To live by this Spirit requires that we cultivate the virtues that Jesus has been encouraging us to live by and exhibit.

We will not know the "reward" of the kingdom of heaven unless we live by those values of that kingdom in our own lives. The kingdom is not some reward in an afterlife; but rather it is a satisfaction we acquire as we act by the values of God in this life. Doing good, living justly, practicing peace, sharing love, and doling out compassion is its own reward. It affirms we know who we are, children of a loving Creator made in that same image, and that no one can make us live otherwise through threats, intimidation, coercion, manipulation, or any other human means. We are in control of our own spirits and souls; and even those with the power of imprisonment and death over us cannot strip us of this eternal power – the power that exceeds all earthly powers.

By keeping our spirit gentle, our soul tender, our heart caring, and our mind benevolent, we become the morally perfect people that Jesus believes and calls us to be. If we don't see this infinite reward to our

soul as valuable as the transitory successes others accrue by human values, then we have not understood the good news of Christ Jesus. Jesus tells us that we are near to the kingdom of heaven whenever we adopt his same vision, and live our lives by implementing that vision in action and practice. It is a blessing we can know here and now.

Are we willing to transform our values so that we no longer feel the need to retaliate, take revenge, get even, or do any of the other things that human values tell us we should do when we are mistreated?

Surely, we will all struggle with this transformation process; for it is pervasive, and involves our whole being, and everything about us. And yet, as we work towards the values that will give us this understanding of life, we will see glimpses of the blessings of knowing that we are acting out of who God created us to be. This is far greater reward to our spirits than any earthly honor that we might achieve.

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2023*