

“You’ve Got to Be Kidding: ‘Turn the Other Cheek?’”

Luke 6:27-31 (Jesus recommends ‘turn the other cheek’ then names the “Golden Rule.”)

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We just heard a portion of a radical sermon by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Those who heard this sermon by Jesus might easily have heard something like the message of loving ones enemies before, from other teachers, because other philosophers at that time were counseling that one should turn ones enemies into friends.¹ What makes Jesus’ sermon *radical* is what Jesus adds: “turn the other cheek.” “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek.” For us to grasp what on earth Jesus meant, it is essential to understand the context of that day.

Today we think of slapping someone on the face like this. [Motion.]

When Jesus taught, people used their right hand for clean purposes and their left hand for dirty purposes. Striking a person on the cheek was an insult, a physical expression similar to verbal cursing. They had rules about this cheek-striking, such as: only people with *more authority* struck those they considered “beneath” them. Evidently striking someone on the cheek was considered a “clean” purpose, because people used their right hand to strike, the **back** of their right hand.

Consider the person who is the recipient of the strike. If that one were to follow Jesus’ advice and turn his or her cheek, then the one who did the striking is put into a conundrum position. It is physically awkward to strike the person on their *other* cheek with the *back* of the clean hand. However, they were not supposed to use their dirty hand to strike. The point is—the one who did the striking is left standing there, in a kind of “trap,” not sure what to do. They could punch the person with a fist, but oddly enough, punching was considered a gesture done only between equals. If the one who started out striking the other on the cheek resorted to punching, when the recipient turned their cheek, then the one who does the punching would be acknowledging that the other is an “equal.” See the conundrum Jesus’ advice to “turn the other cheek” presented the one who did the striking?

This advice of Jesus, to turn the other cheek, which may seem to us foolish or naïve was actually very clever—and even loving. *His paradoxical recommendation would do three things: 1) prick the conscience of the aggressor 2) prevent the quarrel from escalating 3) reveal the inherent equality between the two people.*

I want to be clear what Jesus’ advice did NOT mean. Turning the other cheek, in that day, *did not mean just accepting abuse or violence in a passive way. It did not mean bowing down or acquiescing to the one who did the striking.* Actually, turning the cheek was a radical turning of the tables. It was an out-of-the-box response which would have surprised the striker. Turning the cheek was a sort of an intellectual and spiritual challenge to the striker. This is what turning the other cheek communicates: “What you just did does not humiliate me, I’m equal to you, as a person of worth, and in truth, what you just did was wrong. I’ll put you into an ethical quandary in which you have to face the fact that you just took advantage of me and hurt me. I’m putting you in a frustrating situation yourself. I am still in control of my end of the relationship. I will not escalate

this, but neither will I let you treat me this way without a reasoned and even spiritually-based response of my own.” Jesus would have preferred that while doing this, I would seek to have genuine compassion for the one who struck me.

Jesus points out that if we practice compassion, it has to be consistent. It does not work if we try to have compassion selectively. If we simply love those who are well disposed to us to begin with, we are not stretching our practice of compassion at all!²

We might at first think that the passage about Jesus telling people to turn the other cheek is one of the most irrelevant passages in all of Scripture. People do not hit us on the cheek all that often, and if they did, it would be stupid to say, “Here’s my other cheek,” given the abandonment of all those ancient rules of which hand and which side of the hand can do what. (Of course, if there is any kind of domestic violence, it needs to be faced and dealt with honestly and clearly. We can’t excuse abuse by quoting this cheek-passage of Jesus. If we did, we would be turning Jesus’ message upside down.

This passage seems irrelevant, not able to be implemented, yet I confess that in my own life, this very teaching is one of the most sacred and relevant passages of everything Jesus is recorded as saying.

I’ll share something rather personal in order to explain. Once, someone attacked me in a professional setting with bizarre and irrational behavior. I was hurt, not physically, but professionally. With lots of support from my husband and son over a couple long dinner conversations (our daughter was already in college), I made a decision to hold tenaciously to Jesus’ advice, frankly, as if it were a life raft. I would not retaliate; I would not escalate matters. I confess my non-escalating and non-retaliating was at least partially to demonstrate a moral high ground, but *mostly* I felt that in order to maintain my own spiritual and emotional health, I had to do certain things: 1. Name the truth as I saw it. 2. Claim my equality. 3. Refuse to escalate matters. Though I had no choice in taking the surprising and ridiculous blow, I could stay centered in my response. Do not retaliate, but also do not feel small, and demand equality. Remember Jesus’ recommendation which in his day was summarized as turning the other cheek, did three things: 1) *prick the conscience of the aggressor and 2) prevent the quarrel from escalating. 3) Reveal the inherent equality between people.* Jesus was right. He really was. His apparently foolish advice is extraordinarily wise. This situation of mine worked out, I’m grateful to tell you, and it truly gave me a greater awareness of my internal strength.

I had the occasion to read some high school student papers, and one caught my attention as relating to this exact issue, so I took notes and have kept them. The teacher’s assignment was to write a brief essay that “demonstrated a value” that the students held. In this paper, the student told of a time that he was talking to a girl while getting books out of his locker at school. In his words, “Egged on by his friend, a boy ran up behind me and shoved me against the locker. The two boys laughed and walked away when they could tell I was not getting up to fight him. My lip was bleeding and I was in shock. . . . Yet the most evident feeling that swelled inside me was of a compassionate friend to him. I felt sorry that he was jealous of my talking to the girl. . . . It never would have occurred to me to fight him. . . There was no will to seek revenge, only hope this boy would feel better.” Other students and even nations surely have experiences just like this boy did.

One link that this teen-aged event and my professional attack have to Jesus’ advice to “turn the other cheek” is that the one who receives the blow retains their sense

of equality. *Receiving a blow does not need to make us feel small.* We can retain our sense of equality with the one who struck, even if they have more “authority.” In our choice of responses, we can maintain our sense of *their* being equal to us—that is, not needing to show that we are superior to them—but trying to understand them. *We don’t succumb to their attempted diminishment, but neither do we need to belittle them.* We claim equality through our behavior.

Often in order to behave today in some manner that would be equivalent to turning the other cheek in ancient days we will upset the status quo or do something very differently than usual.

I’ve asked for Carissa Price to help with a demonstration. Carissa is a softball player, and in that game of course she wears a glove to catch balls. However, I’m going to toss her an egg, and just like the picnic game in the park, she’ll toss it back to me. I’d like for you to keep your eyes on Carissa’s hands and arms as she receives the egg.

Notice that Carissa received the egg with moving hands, allowing the egg to keep its momentum, and then she gradually brought the egg to rest. That’s very different than Carissa catching a softball with a stationary glove. If she did that, the egg would crash into her hand—or glove. Thank you, Carissa.

An egg is not an insult or a slap in the face. However, if it breaks when we’re trying to catch it, it does make us have egg on our face.

When something comes at us (whether it is a blow or even bad news), if we bend with it and consider it less an attack than something around which we need to bend, then we can receive it with relative grace. When we’re hit by something, we can maintain our solid footing. We can stay centered in our own Jesus-inspired spirituality and maintain our mental health. To help ourselves, we can keep repeating to ourselves that we are not diminished, but rather that we are equal to whatever challenge this blow brings.

Remember, Jesus’ advice to behave in a novel way, if struck, by turning the other cheek *does three things*: 1) *It catches the aggressor off-guard in a creative way and makes them stop to think* 2) *It prevents the quarrel from escalating* and 3) *It reveals the equality between the two.*

I chose this passage today because it seemed especially relevant to Lent. However, yesterday I was reminded that it has been 7 years that we have been involved in the Iraq war. While this ethic of Jesus was shared for individuals, clearly we need to ask ourselves how it would play out on an international level. Mourning 4400 US deaths and 100,000 Iraqi deaths in the long Iraqi war, we **yearn** to know how to implement this advice of Jesus on a very large scale. This ethic of Jesus tends toward pacifism, for anything that does not **escalate** a quarrel, but rather aims toward an answer between equals could be considered a pacifist stance. However, Jesus’ advice was not to BE PASSIVE. It was advice to use our intellect and imagination to outwit the aggressor instead of just our emotional first reactions and physical force. Really the advice of Jesus was intended and could be **a realistic mainstream ethic**. It is a practical ethic that starts with the notion that no one is above another and that if we use our imagination and intellect--rooted in deep compassion--**we can find ways to confound aggressive acts so that shockingly peaceful answers emerge.**

On Friday there were only 3 of us in a yoga class, so the instructor had time to help us individually with two different yoga positions. When she helped me the first time, she said, **“Open your heart just a little more,”** moving my chest more toward the

ceiling. Then, the second time, when she got to me she said, **“You’re stronger than you think, Carolyn, you can do this.”**

Those words of advice have reverberated in my ears as relevant to the rest of my life—beyond yoga: **“Open your heart just a little more,”** and **“Carolyn, you’re stronger than you think . . .”**

As individuals and as nations, this ethic that Jesus was aiming toward, which would not escalate matters and which claims equality between parties, requires enormous creativity and a desire to love on our part, but we can try to follow this ethic if we **“Open our hearts just a little more”** and by realizing that we’re **“Stronger than we think, we can do it.”**

¹ Think about the advice to be kind to one’s enemies. Depending upon the context, being kind could infer a variety of meanings:

1. Win over your opponent by kindness. “You sure are a good cook. Mom, can I have the car tonight?”
2. Take the moral high ground. “I’m not disagreeing with you, but . . .”
3. Shame your enemy by your superior goodness. “Dad, sis is screaming at me.”
4. Deflect hostility or try to prevent further harm by offering no resistance. “You’re right.”
5. Rise above pettiness. “Now, onto more important matters.”
6. Finally, the advice to be kind to one’s enemies could infer that we show genuine compassion, as Christ taught and lived.

² Karen Armstrong, a famous author now who wrote the book, *The History of God*, and several other best sellers, explains that in her lectures she has realized that compassion is not a popular virtue. She explains that people have said, “Where is the fun of religion if you can’t disapprove of other people!”