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St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
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Words of Mahatma Gandhi: "The first principle of nonviolent social action is noncompliance with anything humiliating."

Last Sunday's Gospel was the sermon at the level place. This morning, Jesus wraps up the sermon by teaching his flock how to oppose the Roman empire's domination of Galilee.

His teachings are timely. Democracies are struggling under the weight of developing, established, and expanding autocracies. Like Russia breathing down the neck of Ukraine as I speak.

Jesus, in response to Rome's grip on Galilee, teaches his followers nonviolent social resistance. Jesus's teachings are detailed in a seminal book by biblical scholar Walter Wink, titled Engaging the Powers. Professor Wink hones in on today's text.

From today's Gospel: *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also*. In the Gospel of Matthew, the text is more explicit: *But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also*.

That's the way my father hit my mother—on the right cheek. My father was right handed. My father backhanded my mother.

Not only did my father inflict pain with the backhand, he delivered humiliation. My father's backhand kept mom in her place. The backhand preserved the social order of our household.

The backhand has a long history. When *underlings* act uppity, that is, as equals, the backhand restores hierarchy. Husband- wife, parent-child, master-slave, and, in the time of Jesus, Roman-Jew. And, since 1619 in what is now the United States, white-Black.

In the time of Jesus, the right hand was the public hand. The left hand was for more private business. Use of the left hand in public was against the law.

It is difficult to use the back of the right hand to deliver a good blow if the hitter is presented with the other cheek, the left cheek. The back of the hitter's hand glances off the cheek. The way to score a direct hit on the left cheek is with the right fist. A round house. Now the hitter has a fistfight on his hands. Fistfights are more or less between equals.

I witnessed white men brutalize Black bodies at close range, in Albany, Georgia. My father had a clothing store on Broad Avenue, center stage of the movement. I do not recall seeing white perpetrators fistfight with victims in Albany and beyond. It is the backhand, the whip, the gun, the noose. If the perp wore a badge, it was a stick, a German shepherd, a water hose, a boot on the neck. Violence reinstated hierarchy.

When Jesus talked about turning the other cheek, Jesus did not mean acquiescence. Jesus presented a third way. Not flight or fight, submission or violence. Rather, stand against injustice by taking the position of an equal. Jesus suggested that if you are going to get hit, do not take the blow as one inferior to the oppressor. The third way is both sacrificial and productive.

Jesus addressed the sermon at the level place to a crowd. When crowds stand against injustice as equals, oppressors have a social revolution on their hands.

On February 1, 1960, four Black students from Greensboro, North Carolina sat as equals at the lunch counter in Woolworth. Maybe it's older age or high blood pressure medicine, but when I see the footage, I tear up. Most painful was the humiliation. White flour poured over Black heads. Spit upon. Jerked off stools from behind and kicked.

The protest went viral. By day four, 300 protestors pulled up to the lunch counters at Woolworth and Kress. Soon, lunch counters all across the South were occupied.

*and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Matthew adds a cloak and the court of law...and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well...*

Jesus's followers were poor. Their wardrobe was a coat, shirt, and cloak. When Jesus instructs his followers to hand over their cloaks, shirts, and coats when sued as debtors, he imagines them disrobing in the courtroom. I imagine Jesus chuckling.

Jewish law at the time stated that a Jew who saw a naked person in public transgressed the law, not the naked person.

Imagine the scene. Lender and lawyer shielding their eyes and hightailing it out of the courtroom.

Matthew adds a third instruction...*and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*

A Roman soldier could stop a Jewish subject and demand the subject to carry whatever he pleased.

The law stipulated that a soldier could grab a hand for only a mile. Bighearted, huh? After a mile, the soldier broke the law.

Imagine the scene. A Roman soldier grabbing his shield back from the Jew who has begun the second mile while bystanders sneaker.

So much for a meek and mild Jesus!

At the beginning of today's text, Jesus instructs us to love our enemies. That's hard.

It is easier for the oppressed to love the oppressor from the stance of an equal. It is harder for the oppressed to love the oppressor from a posture of submission.

Several years ago, I shared a handful of conversations with the Reverend James Lawson. James Lawson taught nonviolent social resistance seminars in Nashville, Tennessee, mostly to seminary students in the Nashville area.

Deceased United States Congressman John Lewis attended the seminars as a seminary student. Congressman Lewis later became the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Congressman Lewis was beaten and jailed many times for his undeterred nonviolent practice of Jesus's teachings. You may remember that President Trump called Congressman Lewis all talk and no action.

James Lawson also coached Dr. King in nonviolence before the 1957 Montgomery bus boycott. James Lawson coached the students for the Nashville lunch counter sit in, by far the most successful sit in.

I sensed no bitterness in Mr. Lawson towards the bigots that populated his life.

When I asked Mr. Lawson about his lack of acrimony, he said, "I am not as nice as you may think, Bill. The way of Jesus works. Loving one's enemy is not an attitude. It's the DNA of our hope."

May our parish, diocese, denomination work for and with one another and the wider community to empower our more vulnerable and maligned neighbors to turn the other cheek to those who and that which would humiliate them.

Amen.