

“Truth Force”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages. FL
February 19th, 2017
7th Sun./Epiphany

1st Corinthians 3:10-23

Matthew 5:38-48

I laid a foundation on which others have built.

*But we must each be careful how we build, because Christ is the only foundation.
Whatever we build on that foundation will be tested by fire on the day of judgment.*

1st Cor. 3:10^b-13

Let us pray... O God,

Make us slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Strengthen us to take our stand

with truth and love when we are in disagreement.

Embolden us to creatively respond to injustice

and trust that you are the source of our help.

Amen

The first time I heard of Walter Wink was when a seminary classmate asked me to do a series of drawings for a presentation he was giving.

Jim Chinworth is a pastor with the Church of The Brethren –

a denomination whose practices include believers’ baptism by immersion, “feetwashing”, and is characterized as a “peace church” – similar to the Quakers, Mennonites, and the Amish.

Jim was doing a presentation on Jesus’ teachings about nonviolence

from the Sermon on the Mount from Walter Wink’s interpretation.

Instead of the acquiescent acceptance of abuse,

turning the other cheek, giving the shirt off your back, and going the extra mile are subtle acts of subversion to turn the tables on the ‘powers that be’.

Here are the drawings that I did for my friend, in sequence:

[First slide] Here is an authority figure of some kind, backhanding a servant...

This is followed by the servant ‘turning the other cheek’ [Next slide], exposing the left side of his face.

The overlord is suddenly confused, because to strike again would be awkward – and illegal.

This would mean making the servant an equal by hitting with a fist or palm – and therefore, an assault.

In Walter Wink’s writings, he described a Bible study with gang members in Harlem, NYC, in which they worked out the choreography of what Jesus was saying and what Wink knew of the 1st Century Roman laws and Judean culture.

He applied this to the other teachings of nonviolence...

Willard, p.2

The most important thing a poor person owned was their outer coat

[Next slide]

and if they were sued for any reason, they could be required to offer up their cloak – which was supposed to be returned each evening at sundown.

[Next slide]

To offer up one's cloak or undergarment – literally the 'shirt off one's back', was to provoke another customary scandal.

By standing naked in public, the defendant would be causing every spectator present to be guilty of a sin.

Artist-minister Charles McCollough shares Walter Wink's view of this parable, pointing out that the ensuing uproar would momentarily highlight the absurdity of the law –and the bigger injustice of depriving poor people from what little they had.

Judea and Galilee were occupied by the Romans who used their military to preserve a harsh 'peace' [Next slide]

Still there were laws to limit abusive behavior – like *lex talionis* which called for no more than an 'eye' than an 'eye'.

Such a law that kept Roman soldiers from antagonizing the local people was one that allowed them to force someone to carry their equipment – but no more than a mile. [Next slide]

In this illustration, the hapless soldier is suddenly at risk of disobeying orders and being disciplined as the peasant who was pressed into service, keeps going passed the one mile mark!

Though unlikely to change the rule, this simple act heightens the absurdity of injustice – though I am inclined to think the humor of the situation could even lead to a friendly exchange as these two walk together...

This set of teachings opens with the same phrase

as the others in this first section of the Sermon on the Mount –

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil.

Matthew 5:38

'An eye for an eye' refers to a phrase used in

Exodus 21:26-27, Leviticus 24:19-20, Deuteronomy 19:21

to describe the limits of retaliation in response to injury.

Though this should mean *no more than* an eye for an eye or tooth for tooth, more likely it is seen as permission to punish.

Jesus offers an alternative when he says, *Do not resist one who is evil*, or as it says in the King James Version, *resist not evil*.

However theologian Walter Wink said that Jesus was all about resisting evil and that there is a more accurate way of understanding this text.

Willard, p.3

Wink says the Greek word used for 'resist' means to 'stand against' – as in armies standing in violent opposition to each other.

So, we are urged not to oppose an enemy with violence.

It is in this context that we are to “fight back” in ways that Jesus described – creatively and nonviolently.

These simple teachings have provided the basis for successfully achieving nonviolent campaigns in modern times; including the Indian people achieving liberation led by Mahatma Gandhi,, as well as the Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Such movements were organized and principled according to what Gandhi called “Satyagraha” or “Truth-force” and which Dr. King referred to as ‘

“Soul force” in his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, when he said:
Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Nonviolence is implied, but as a strategy of courage and strength, while in sharp contrast with passive resistance.

Gandhi did say that when the choice was between cowardice and violence in defense of one’s family and country, that he would counsel violence.

Yet he insisted that nonviolence represented a better way.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyagraha>

Here is what Dr. King himself said on this subject:

*Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi,
but I had never studied him seriously.*

*As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns
of nonviolent resistance...*

*The whole concept of Satyagraha
(Satya is truth which equals love, and agraha is force;
Satyagraha, therefore, means truth force or love force)
was profoundly significant to me.*

*As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi,
my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished,
and I came to see for the first time its potency
in the area of social reform. ...*

*It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered
the method for social reform that I had been seeking.*

King, Jr., Martin Luther (1998). Carson, Clayborne, ed. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. pp. 23–24

This Holy Spirit of Truth force or Soul force is evident in Jesus’ closing words of the first part of his Sermon on the Mount, when he says:

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be [children] of your [Abba] Father who is in heaven;*

Matthew 42^a-43

Willard, p. 4

Hear now, how I have interpreted the text from Matthew 5:38-48...

**YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
DON’T HIT YOUR ABUSER BACK – WITH VIOLENCE...
IF SOMEONE BACKHANDS THE RIGHT SIDE OF YOUR FACE,
TURN SO THEY’D HAVE TO STRIKE THE LEFT SIDE –
AND RISK BEING GUILTY OF ASSAULT.
AND IF SOMEONE SUES YOU
FOR THE SHIRT OFF YOUR BACK,
EMBARRASS THEM WITH YOUR NAKEDNESS
BY OFFERING YOUR CLOAK, TOO.
AND IF A ROMAN SOLDIER FORCES YOU
TO CARRY HIS PACK FOR A MILE –
GO TWO MILES AND MAKE A FRIEND.
ANYTIME SOMEONE ASKS YOU TO GIVE THEM SOMETHING,
OR TO BORROW SOMETHING, DON’T TURN YOUR BACK ON THEM.**

**YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID,
‘THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR’ AND
‘THOU SHALT HATE THINE ENEMY.’
BUT I SAY TO YOU,
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND
PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU,
SO THAT YOU MAY BECOME
CHILDREN OF YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN.
FOR GOD HAS MADE
THE SUN TO SHINE UPON THE EVIL AND THE GOOD;
THE RAIN TO FALL UPON THE JUST AND THE UNJUST.**

**SO, IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU,
ISN’T THAT ITS OWN REWARD?
EVEN THIEVES AND TRAITORS DO THIS.
AND IF YOU ONLY WELCOME THOSE WHO ARE LIKE YOU
WHAT WOULD BE NOBLE ABOUT THAT?
YET, ISN’T THIS WHAT THE EXTREMISTS DO?
INSTEAD, PERFECT YOURSELF IN THIS WAY –
BY PRACTICING GOD’S PERFECT WAY OF LOVING-KINDNESS.**

Let us seek the perfection that comes from allowing the Spirit of love,
Truth force, Soul force, to work through us.

Amen

Our lesson today from 1st Corinthians 3:10-23 speaks about the importance of putting down a good foundation of faith through education...

¹⁰ God was kind and let me become an expert builder.

I laid a foundation on which others have built.

But we must each be careful how we build,

¹¹ because Christ is the only foundation.

¹²⁻¹³ Whatever we build on that foundation

will be tested by fire on the day of judgment.

Then everyone will find out if we have used gold, silver, and precious stones, or wood, hay, and straw.

¹⁴ We will be rewarded if our building is left standing.

¹⁵ But if it is destroyed by the fire, we will lose everything.

Yet we ourselves will be saved, like someone escaping from flames.

¹⁶ All of you surely know that you are God's temple

and that his Spirit lives in you.

¹⁷ Together you are God's holy temple,

and God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple.

¹⁸ Don't fool yourselves!

If any of you think you are wise in the things of this world,

you will have to become foolish before you can be truly wise.

¹⁹ This is because God considers the wisdom of this world to be foolish.

It is just as the Scriptures say,

"God catches the wise when they try to outsmart him."

²⁰ The Scriptures also say,

"The Lord knows that the plans made by wise people are useless."

²¹⁻²² So stop bragging about what anyone has done.

Paul and Apollos and Peter all belong to you.

In fact, everything is yours, including the world, life, death,

the present, and the future.

Everything belongs to you,

²³ and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 5:38-48

[Jesus said,]

38 “You have heard that it was said,

‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

39 But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil.

But if any one strikes you on the right cheek,

turn to him the other also;

40 and if any one would sue you and take your coat,

let him have your cloak as well;

41 and if any one forces you to go one mile,

go with him two miles.

42 Give to him who begs from you,

and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said,

‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45 so that you may be [children] of your [Abba] Father who is in heaven;

for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,

and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47 And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48 You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly [Abba] Father is perfect.