

**THE OTHER CHEEK**  
*Sermon for Epiphany 7A-Mt. 5:21-37*  
LPC, 2/19/17

For the past several Sundays we have been talking about the Sermon on the Mount. Everybody knows about the Sermon on the Mount, but it seems like few people know what it actually says, and fewer still do anything about what it really preaches.

As an aside, this is why it always pays to read the scriptures yourself, and not just accept unquestioningly what you've heard about them -- even from me! But you need to be careful, especially around difficult passages. There are two main things to keep in mind:

1. You shouldn't take individual verses out of context. This is called "proof-texting." All of us do this from time to time but it's dangerous.
2. When Christians read the Bible, especially for guidance, we do so always mindful of the life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That said, this is our last Sunday in a series where our Gospel Lesson comes from the Sermon on the Mount. As we have seen, the content of the Sermon on the Mount is difficult to hear, difficult to understand, and even more difficult to follow. What have we heard so far?

1. That the trials of life are not just something to get past, but are blessed states.
2. That trials are therefore not signs of God's disfavor.
3. Conversely, that good fortune is neither a reward for righteousness nor a sign of God's special favor.
4. That everyone's life preaches a gospel, whether we realize it or not.
5. That the world desperately needs the gospel we have been given to share.
6. That often nobody's going to thank you for following God's will, especially in the service of peace-making and reconciliation. You can easily get shot at from both sides. But as Mother Theresa says, do it anyway.
7. That following the letter of law without love is worthless.
8. That, even we succeed in following every provision of every commandment, we will still be called to something even higher.
9. That no one, no matter how righteous, can actually do this, therefore everyone is absolutely at God's mercy.
10. That to bear hate, anger and lust in the heart injures the soul as surely as the perpetration of murder, violence and adultery.

Last week I gave special attention to the last point, particularly in the common manifestation of anger in saying, "You fool." I remarked that the exact words don't have to be "You fool." They can be any words spoken angrily, hatefully or dismissively: words like "You idiot," "That jerk," or even something as apparently innocent as "That man," if pronounced with sufficient venom. I further remarked that there are a lot of epithets like these flying around these days, especially in our current political climate.

I admitted I was preaching to myself as much as to anyone else, since such epithets come pretty easily to my mind and to my lips. I opined that Jesus was calling us to something else. Judging from what people said to me afterwards, I think I touched a nerve.

As difficult as this teaching is, today it gets worse. We may as well admit it. We are told that if we are wronged we are not to demand retribution. We are told not to retaliate in kind. We are told to exceed reasonable standards of generosity. We are told to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors.

Turn the other cheek. Surely we are not to take this literally! Were African-Americans to turn the other cheek and be perpetually enslaved and oppressed? Were Jews to turn the other cheek and allow Hitler to exterminate them? Are abused spouses to turn the other cheek and submit to beatings and worse? If turning the other cheek is the only thing going on, exploiters and wrong-doers have no incentive to cease exploitation and wrong-doing!

Now there are examples of great movements emerging, ultimately, from Jesus' Sermon-on-the-Mount admonition turning the other cheek. Mahatma Gandhi successfully led a non-violent revolution that freed his people. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a non-violent revolution that overturned generations of racial injustice. Of course, they both paid with their lives. Our violent world is not kind to the non-violent.

What are we going to take from that? Are we then to return violence for violence? It is the path of least resistance and undoubtedly the safest thing to do. But is it the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Now, let me back up. Admittedly, our current political divisions are nowhere near as violent as imperial oppression and Jim Crow laws. Thank God. Lust and anger are nowhere near as violent as adultery and murder. But Jesus has said those emotions show us our need for God's mercy. Our political outrage should do likewise.

So, in our current divisive political climate, what does it mean to turn the other cheek? It does not mean to stand down on matters of justice, as Gandhi and Martin showed us. It does however mean not returning insult for insult. It means remaining polite when others are rude. It means calmly cross-checking facts when others exaggerate for dramatic effect. It may mean not passing on a particularly inflammatory email. It may mean saying to a friend, "What are your sources on that?" or to an opponent, "Can you tell me how you reached that view?" It means working for what you believe is just and right for all persons while striving to remain in relationship with people who disagree about what is meet and right.

Be wary of rage. Anger can be a powerful motivation for justice, but it can also eat us up. It is like fire that gives light and warmth and energy if harnessed but destroys if unchecked.

Refusal to retaliate in kind may not win many friends. It made Gandhi, and Martin and Jesus, many enemies. It may be virtually inconsequential in this violent and divided world. But it is what Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the Gospel way. It is the voice that says, "I may have no influence on the angry world around me, I may not prevail, but I choose life. I choose to serve the Lord of life and follow his Gospel of Love."