

Title: Loving those who are not for you
Text: Luke 6:20-31
Rev. Sharon Smith

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously. (*The Message paraphrase*)

"Love those who are 'not for you'.

Do good to those who 'bring out the worst in you'"

"Bless those who 'give you a hard time', pray for them"

And...

"If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also"

(Language from Eugene Peterson's The Message)

The gospel before us lays a path
...a Way... worth striving for.
...a relational style that is the fruit of an inner journey.

I continue to wrestle with these words of Jesus - not so much about their meaning in an abstract sense - how they contribute to thoughts about love, liberation or war somewhere over there in the world - important as these may be...

... I have been deliberating how the essence of these words...

invites us **to reconsider our actions and reactions in our everyday relationships.**

In what follows... I want to process aloud with you.
I want us to consider human responses... to very real situations.

And by verbalizing specific dilemmas, I hope that we will continue to process together what it means as a community to enact love, to bless and to pray for those who are 'not for us' – 'who give us a hard time'.

An important and necessary introductory comment, is to say that in situations of continued physical, verbal, sexual or emotional abuse, your own safety is the most important consideration. Please seek help, I am available if you need help and don't know where to turn.

**Let us together consider Jesus' tricky words:
"A person strikes you on the cheek..."**

Words can hurt us. They can feel like a strike on the cheek.
And it is 'striking' because it often brings to life the many bruises of our past.

Like:

.. When we perceive laughter at our expense; it joins the echoes of past laughter;
...When our thought-through ideas are not given a hearing; it may join the past dismissals;
...When we are harshly critiqued; it resonates with our fear, and we wonder if it might be true.
...or when we give a word of love and receive indifference in return.

Each slap... is never a strike on its own. It always reconnects internally with past experiences that have become our 'demons' in the caverns of our souls.

And it happens in just a moment.

So when...

"A person strikes you on the cheek..."

First...

We might do nothing. Be it learnt or instinctive.

We may simply stand there habitually, Waiting for the other to act again. Passive.

We inhabit in that moment solely a victim position. We give our voice away.

We lose a sense of ourselves.

We simply wait for the 'other's' next move without paying any attention to our feelings, our needs, let alone what **our** actions might be.

Or even how we might react differently to what we have done in the past.

Or when...

"A person strikes you on the cheek..."

Second...

We might feel it intensely. Our anger and our sadness overwhelms us. We walk away.

The action possibly motivated by -

(1) self protection (we have been in the situation before and the other kept on striking)
combined with

(2) our fears of our own response. We feel out of control. We do this to protect the other
(and perhaps our reputations)

For who knows how we might retaliate in word or deed out of our anger.

We do the best we can in the moment and remove ourselves.

But will we return to the conversation once composed and then what?
What will we choose to say/do?

Or when...

“A person strikes you on the cheek...”

Third...

We might choose to offer a response and strike back.

Repay violence with violence.

It seems that our instinctive nature might call this out of us. A reptilian fight pattern in the absence of fleeing away.

Even once composed we might enact violence through blame, shaming the other for their act as a judgement of their character. Striking back at their person.

We might even strike back publicly for extra measure.

Or when...

“A person strikes you on the cheek...”

Fourth...

We might choose to risk standing their vulnerable, emotionally naked - offering our cloak and our shirt.

We try desperately to find a way past blame of the other.

And we blame ourselves:

- Did I provoke you? Did I take your words the wrong way?
- And then we wait. Once again feeling like a victim.

4 possible responses to a person’s words that wound us:

- Habitually Remain - passive
- Walk away
- Strike back
- Intentionally Remain – self-blame

I have inhabited all four of these positions many times... often getting stuck in roles I am still trying to shed.

Sometimes going in with good intentions and coming undone halfway through.

And then I read Jesus’ words...

If “A person strikes you on the cheek...”

“offer the other cheek also.”

Wait, what?

Deeply imbedded is an invitation to intentionally remain; an invitation to non-violence in word and in deed.

But that's not all.

Digging deeper we see that this is not "passive", habitual remaining or self-blame.

There is also an invitation to act intentionally by turning, naming a new reality and calling the other to be more fully who you believe them to be.

I reflect here on the work of Biblical Scholar and Theologian Dr. Walter Wink.

Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way,

Wink argues that Christ abhors both the responses of passivity and violence.

Allow me to indulge in scholarship that makes use of the historical critical method:

Wink suggests that by offering both cheeks to a person in the Middle Eastern context was in fact asking them to use the front and back of their right hand (left hand anything was taboo... left hands were only used for functions that later motivated the invention of bathroom tissue/ loo paper).

Wink makes a case by analyzing the backhanded slap.

His historical research revealed that this manner of striking was reserved for admonishing inferiors - Masters backhanded their slaves; parents backhanded their children; Romans backhanded Jews.

It was culturally imbedded such that there were fines for backhanding a peer (a person of equal stature in the community)

If you were angry with a peer you gave a forehanded slap.

(Lots of slapping going on in the first century!)

As Jesus addresses an audience most of whom were oppressed, marginalized, down trodden, he knows their familiarity with the backhanded slap Right hand to right cheek. (See Matthew 5: 38-42).

Turn your cheek he says. Offer the other a second chance to strike you **but as an equal**. For that would be the only choice remaining. (you try backhanding right hand to left cheek).

This action of turning the cheek robbed the oppressor of the power to further humiliate.

According to Wink... this act was in effect saying and I quote:

"Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."

Miroslav Volf - a native Croatian - has written a thoughtful study on the theology of embrace. His words are richly embodied in his experience of the conflict between Serbs and Croats.

He writes: "If the plot [in any conflict] is written around the schema of 'victim' and 'oppressor', each party will find good reasons for claiming the higher moral ground of a victim; each will perceive itself as oppressed by the other and each will see themselves as engaged in the struggle for liberation.

These categories provide combat gear, good for fighting but not... for embrace"

Later he writes... "while liberation is noble"... "the greatest freedom exists in vulnerable love."

So... "A person strikes you on the cheek..."

Let us reconsider **our** ways.
Particularly as we move into our Vestry meeting.

For...

Jesus' response asks of us:

- to pay attention to our instinctive fight or flight responses and find a way to remain or to return...

Jesus' response asks of us:

- to find it within ourselves to stand sure in vulnerability and lay the victim and powerful oppressor roles aside.

Jesus' response asks of us:

- to believe that everyone has the capacity to act differently.

Put another way Jesus' words calls us to believe the possibility that by offering a human being (no matter how they have acted) an opportunity to see humanity, they have an opportunity to choose to enact love instead of hate..

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"Bless those who 'give you a hard time', pray for them"

And...

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In this season of Epiphany we are reflecting on Our lives of faith.

I have been inviting us to think about the question:
What does it mean for you to live a life of faith?

Today I have asked the Gary Stewart to share her reflections on this question: What does it mean for you to live a life of faith?