

The Third Way
March 31, 2019

Last week we were bystanders to an escalating game of retaliation.
It started with three people, Samson and his parents, with plans for the future.
Then came an offense, a retaliation, a greater retaliation,
A jawbone at one point that Samson used to strike down 1000 men.
It ended with Samson's death.

Everyone in the story was just doing what came naturally.
Human beings are hard-wired to retaliate.
When challenged, our instinct tells us we must win,
and so we repay insult for insult
evil for evil
and violence for violence,
thinking, "THIS will *finally* be the war to end all wars."

And into this insanity comes the cross.
Jesus gave up his life and in doing so shouted:
The retaliation, the violence and the insanity stops here.
He took the retaliation and violence and insanity – our sin – upon himself.
He absorbed it and took it out of circulation.

Jesus is saying, "It's time to put down the jawbone.

But where does that leave us?
If we don't fight back, retaliate or seek revenge,
are we just helpless, hopeless victims in the face of a bully?

I grew up in a church where this is what I was taught.
Just bear with abuse – like Jesus did.
Submit; turn the other cheek.
And the people who did that (especially the women), were called "a saint!"

I actually had a pastor tell me,
Even if your husband were to kill you,
Remember, they killed Jesus too.
At least you'll go to heaven.

The sad result of this teaching was that many sinful, destructive behaviors got ignored if not sanctioned
in the service of “being like Jesus.”

Why, you’ve heard Jesus say . . .

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’

But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;
and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Matthew 5:38-41

At first blush, this sure sounds like – just be the doormat
Just let the bully win.

But is there another way to understand these teaching of Jesus
that is neither passive acquiesce *nor* aggressive retaliation?

Come with me and as we look more deeply will hear Jesus say
YES, there is another way.
There is a THIRD WAY.

This is something that has to be caught as much as taught.
So, listen today with your heart and not just your head.

Jesus begins,,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’

Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament Law.

The purpose of this law was to *limit* retaliation.

If someone took an eye, you couldn’t turn around and take an eye *and* a hand.
Just an eye.

So Jesus says, *you’ve heard it said, BUT I SAY . . .*

There’s a whole new way of doing life, of being human.

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

The key to understanding Jesus’ teaching is in knowing the context.

In Jewish culture, only the right hand could be used to hit someone.
That's because the left hand was used for sanitary tasks, for unclean tasks.

In Qumran communities, if you even gestured with your left hand,
you would be excluded for the community for 10 days.

Now if I take my right hand to hit you with my fist, where will the blow land?
On your left cheek.

If I were to hit you on the right cheek, what do I have to do?
I would have to hit you with a back-handed slap.

Do . . . there's the fist-punch and the to the left cheek,
And the back-handed slap on the right cheek.
These two types of assaults had different meanings in Jewish culture.

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade.
It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior.
Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children.

If someone back-handed someone on the right cheek, it was meant to demean them.

Now if you turn to me your left cheek,
it makes it possible for me to hit you with my right *fist*,
but not the back of your hand.

A *fist* punch in Jewish culture is how you would take on an equal
with whom you're settling a dispute.

If I'm the dominant person, the bully,
the last thing I want to do is to establish is your equality.

Are you beginning to see how brilliant this is?
Jesus says to the person without power,
neither responds to a back-handed insult with the intended humiliation,
(walking away with your tail between your legs)
nor with retaliation (which would invite more abuse.)

No, but the less positionally powerful person was to take the next initiative,
and in doing so maintain their dignity, presenting themselves as an equal,
stripping the bully of their power to humiliate.

Gandhi, a master of non-violent resistance taught,
"The first principle of nonviolent action is
non-cooperation with everything humiliating."
He learned this from Jesus.

Here is a modern-day example:
A black woman was walking on a South African street with her children,
when a white man, passing, spat in her face.
She stopped and said, "Thank you, and now for the children."
He was so taken aback he couldn't respond,
shrinking from how cruel it would be to spit at children,
as she walked by in peace.
Maybe for the first time he saw his own cruelty.

Next Jesus says, if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat,
give your cloak (undergarments) as well.

Jesus' second example takes place in a court of law.
A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan.

The Law, written in **Deuteronomy 24:10-13** provided that
a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer robe,
but it had to be returned each evening
so the poor man would have something to sleep in.

This registered with Jesus hearers, for the consequence of Roman imperial domination,
left many people in the positions of having been stripped them of their lands,
their goods, and finally even their outer garments.

What would they have left? Only their undergarment.
What happens if suddenly you give your creditor your shirt too?
You'd be leaving the courtroom virtually naked!

But here's the thing in Jewish culture.
It was just as taboo to *see* a naked person as it was to *be* the naked person.
The powerless one seizes the initiative and puts the onus on the creditor.

Now, there stands the creditor,
the poor debtor's outer garment in the one hand, his undergarment in the other.
Who's feel ashamed now?

The creditor has a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life,
just how naked *he* is and the insanity of his desire to take all!
And *perhaps* in seeing he would be led to repentance.

OK, so here's one modern day example – you have to find the humor in this.

Shortly before the fall of apartheid in South Africa,
police descended on a squatters' camp they had long wanted to demolish.
They gave the few women there five minutes to gather their possessions,
before the bulldozers would level their shacks.

The women, apparently sensing the puritanical streak in rural police,
stripped naked and came and stood before the bulldozers.
The police were so mortified that they turned and fled.
Bully's aren't as all-powerful as they appear.
So far as we know, that camp still stands.

Jesus' teaching on the third way provides a hint of how to take on the entire system
without the escalating insanity of retaliation.

Next: And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

During the roman occupation, if a Roman soldier was in transit on foot,
he could enlist on his whim the service of any subjected person he saw
to carry his packs for one mile.

But, enlisting the subject to carry your pack a *second* mile
was an infraction of military code
and would be met with severe discipline by the Roman commander.

So what happens if the subjected person offers to go a second mile?
He's not being a doormat to Rome, nor would this be an act of retaliation.

By offering to go the second mile,
the powerless has taken the initiative and asserted their human dignity
and put the Roman soldier in a very awkward position.
Not getting the expected response of seeing a man humiliated and seething with resentment,
the soldier is thrown off balance.
If he enjoyed throwing his weight around and humiliating people, (like bully's do)
he would not enjoy it this today.

Imagine a Roman soldier pleading with a subject to give back his pack!
What a power shift!

Here's an example right out of Paul's playbook in **Acts 25** that uses the law to his own advantage.

Paul had delivered a young fortune teller of an evil spirit.
Her owner became angry because now she couldn't earn him any money.
So he gets Paul and his companion Silas arrested and thrown in jail.
But are they dejected?
No!
They sang their hearts out all night.
During the night there's a great earthquake, their chains fell off, the jailer gets saved.
It's a fantastic story, but here's what I want you to notice.

35 When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." 36 The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

Do they slink away, having been chastened and humiliated by their ordeal?
No!

"They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.

Paul now stands in the power position,
with the officials quite alarmed
and begging Paul and Silas to leave quickly and quietly.
You might think Paul's motive was just to enjoy his moment of triumph,
but think again.
His actions gave cover to the other Christians in the city.
The officials would think twice before messing with them
and running the risk that anyone would draw attention to their big faux pas.

You've got to love it!

To an oppressed people, Jesus is saying,
Do not continue passive acquiescence or aggressive retaliation.
Neither be overpowered nor try to overpower.

The third way is neither submission nor assault,
Neither flight nor fight,
but a way to secure your human dignity
and begin to change the power equation.

The Third Way is *not* just a new strategy for winning.
If you're using Third-Way thinking just as a strategy to get one over on the powerful,
you've missed the whole spirit of Jesus!

You can win an argument but alienate the person.
Sure, you won, but at what cost?
The Third Way is not about winning over people, but to winning people over.
It not about taking pleasure in putting the bully in his place,
but about winning the bully over.

Nor is the Third-Way a strategy so that you can feel good about yourself.
It's not about protecting your ego;
it's about protecting your energy,
If your energy gets depleted through humiliation or aggressiveness,
you're no longer free to active enter the creative process of kingdom building.

The Third Way is actively loving your enemy, the bully, the mean-spirit person,
because you're holding open the opportunity for insight, repentance and change.

Third Way thinking is a whole new way of thinking requires lots of creativity.
It's like a muscle that needs exercise.
It takes a long time and this really to come up with Third Way options.
But the more you exercise your Third Way muscle,
the more it will begin to become second nature.

I have a whole page full of modern-day examples that I don't have time to share now,
but which I will leave on the table outside for you to take home,
along with a synopsis of Jesus' Third-Way teaching.
so you can start exercising those new muscles.

Surely, it will be true. **The MEEK will inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5**

Surely, **Proverbs 24:5** rings true:

A wise warrior is better than a strong one,
and a man of knowledge than one of strength;

And **Ecclesiastes 9:18** proves true time and again,
The calm words of the wise are heeded over the shouts of a ruler among fools.
Wisdom is better than weapons of war.

So, Jesus lead on!

**Lead us into Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost.
For this *IS* the Kingdom of God.**