

Don't react violently against the one who is evil; when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let the person have your coat along with it. Further when anyone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. Give to the one who begs from you; and don't turn away the one who tries to borrow from you.

The Jewish lists (of eye, cheek, coat) go back to deep antiquity in Rabbinic literature, each with specific fines attached. The main examples of damage are to the eye (physical pain and damage), slapping (pained embarrassment), and garment taking (embarrassment).

The farther you go down the list, the easier they are to accept. A cloak or coat concerns a person shaming you by either lifting up or tearing your garment. There is a degree of shame but no physical pain as there is in slapping.

Jesus the pacifist advises that *if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.*

To strike someone on the right cheek usually meant striking them with the back of the hand. In Middle Eastern culture, this was twice as insulting as a slap delivered with the palm of the hand.

Jesus the nonviolent resister teaches *If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well* (and so literally lay bare the injustice of taking a poor person's clothing).

Jesus the nonviolent resister *teaches when anyone conscripts you and forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.* The reference is likely to the Roman custom of conscripting locals to carry their gear, but only for one mile; to carry the accoutrements of the enemy willingly signals the refusal to be victimized. Notice in this list of offenses whether Jesus is talking about a neighbor or enemy. When he mentions conscription, we know he is talking about Roman soldiers so they are definitely not part of the Christian community. Not like, for instance, today's Egyptian army is part of their community, made up of Egyptians.

Give to the one who begs from you; and don't turn away the one who tries to borrow from you.

Jesus the social reformer seeks to inaugurate the economic justice envisioned by the prophets, insisting "Give when you are asked."

Even if it is a kidney they want from you, like the Wake Forest coach recently gave for his team member. There it is, in practice. But we must notice that the team member is just that, someone with whom the coach is in community. A lot depends on whether Jesus is talking about a neighbor or enemy, someone in our community or out.

No matter who does it to us, some of these injunctions are hard. Nonretaliation urges Jesus' followers to opt out of the process of revenge through violence, prohibits violence but also demands that brutality and force be met with abounding goodness. Just witnessed in Tahrir Square!

But then we get to the nub, the core of what Jesus is asking us here.

Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

Easy for you to say, Jesus, when we think of our list of grievances:

A quote I saw online uses words I don't use but it gets the point across: " 'How can I talk about praying for bin Laden when I cannot pray for the (lowlife) in my own community? How can I pray for them when I cannot forgive the guy who cheated me with my blacktop?' There are Christian people who have trouble praying for a two-timing spouse, a drug-using child, a shoplifting employee, a selfish, egotistical neighbor, or the coach of their son's Little League team who never lets the kid play. Or what about the trusted person who abused a child?" End of quote. I heard a speaker at a funeral Friday say that the freedom to do depends on what has been done to you.

When struck, we tend to strike back; when sued, want to sue in return. But Jesus says don't retaliate and what's more,

Love your enemies. God causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and unjust. Tell me, if you love those who love you, why should you be commended for that? Even the tax collectors do as much, don't they?

Jesus cites God's care for all creatures to challenge us about restricting love to only those who can benefit us or already love us. The admonition

to “love your enemies” is somewhere close to the heart of the teachings of Jesus. In red print. The Jesus Seminar ranked it highest among sayings that almost certainly originated with Jesus (the other two, the complex about turning the other cheek and the cluster of beatitudes). The injunction to love enemies is a memorable aphorism because it cuts against the social grain and constitutes a paradox: those who love their enemies have no enemies.

This is not about loving those who love us. Love of enemies identifies one as a child of God because God causes the sun to rise on both bad and good the rain to fall on the just and unjust. God does not restrict love to the morally superior. Returning love to those who love us gets no commendation. Even tax collectors do as much.

Those of us who carefully keep lists of friends and acquaintances who have invited us to dinner or drinks or a play so that we can someday repay them: that is not the kind of love Jesus is talking about. His vision is much more communal and inclusive, love meant for *all*, not just our friends or fellow Christians.

Matthew cites precedent in our Leviticus reading from the Hebrew Bible where the people of Israel are admonished to leave some crops for the poor and the alien. A practice common among many tribes around the world, to share crops, from the early ripening to the late ripening so that all are fed over the season. Samoans coming to Hawaii, Hmong immigrants coming here more recently to Merced, California, could not

understand why they could not pick from their neighbor's yards if fruit was ripe. It was a reciprocal practice like paying back people we owe.

But here Jesus asks us to reach out beyond our tribe.

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?

And he is talking about our enemies, not, I think, about those who irritate us. Not that particular person who drives us up the wall. You Jungians know Carl Jung suggested we focus on people who irritate us to discern what trait of theirs is in fact our own. But Jesus is talking about real enemies, *ekthros* is the Greek word used here, people who are hostile, whom we really hate or who hate us.

Jesus asks us to love those people, either individuals, or clumps of people: people we don't even know whose skin or religion may define them as "other," as alien. Creating the polarities of our time, the this and that; the him and me; us and them. There are times in history when we just feel the Spirit groaning for release.

The release of Tahrir Square. The vicarious thrill in peoples rejoicing. I felt it in a modified way one night in Rome when Italy had just won the world cup in soccer. Horns honking, people leaping to the tops of parapets, arms flung wide, laughter and tears, and total welcome of any strangers in their path. And have we not felt it at times in our past? One 1960s night in Prospect at the beginning of what we thought was a

new age of freedom and love, I asked someone “Can’t you feel it coming?” The sadness that it didn’t. But the years of thinking it was. At its purest, it was a try at loving the enemy. Flowers stuck in gun barrels. Making love not war.

And oh, I know this subject is far more complicated when we get down to trying to love a particular person who has done us grievous harm. Easy for you to say, Jesus, and I realize what I have just said. How he loved those who did him grievous harm, loves those *yet* who *yet* do him grievous harm.

This week I asked a choir member friend here at church what she does about praying for an enemy. She said, “I ask to dance with God to the tune of that other person.” For of course, God loves that person.

Since God supplies sun and rain for all kinds of people, the challenge is to work from God’s perspective of care and love for all.

Doubt is part of my faith but so is wild hope. That Spirit can inbreak. There are moments when we can feel the possibility of actually loving our enemies and being one people loved by God.

Consider who is your enemy. Can we try and take upon ourselves the conditions of that alienated person? Can we ask God for God’s view of the person who may make our blood run cold, a person miles from us in spirit? Can we pray fervently to God, “May you and I, just for a few moments, dance to the tune of that person?”

