

Langley Mennonite Fellowship, September 26, 2021; Matthew 5:38 – 48: *Jesus and The Irony of Power*

Wayne: Thanks for the opportunity to share again at LMF. We've called the reflection: *Jesus and The Irony of Power*.

1 Context: *The Sermon on the Mount*

Every time I go through the Sermon on the Mount, in particular today's text, I do a double-take. How do we "*resist not*" an evil person? How do we *not* retaliate? How do we *really* "*love our enemies*?"

The Sermon on the Mount was nonetheless *the go-to text* of the earliest Christians during the first three centuries. It was key to spiritual formation. They sought in it also how they were to live under the shadow of a brutal Roman Empire that had recently crucified their Lord. How to live as well amongst fellow Jews, and later fellow Gentiles, often displaying open hostility towards them?

The situation *then* was not unlike Palestinians living *today* under the thumb of an occupation by Israel, which regularly brutalizes them. We'll return to the Palestine conflict later.

a. Ethical Dualism

With relation however to the Sermon on the Mount, an *ethical dualism* in the West began to grow that split the text's application in two. Christians were to:

- on the one hand worship God in the spiritual area of life;
- but on the other, give obedience and loyalty to the Emperor/King/State in the rest of life.

It was ironically the Church itself that *first drove a wedge between the spiritual and the secular*.

An *ethical dualism had already taken root by—and ever since—the 4th century*.

b. Two-Kingdoms/Realms Theology

In the early 16th century, with the advent of the Great Reformer **Martin Luther**, this two-tiered ethical dualism further morphed into a two-kingdoms or two-realms theology that helped ordinary Christians additionally find a way *not* to follow the Sermon on the Mount in daily life!¹

That is: the Sermon became in application at best *private and personal*; no longer *social and political*.

Eventually, up to the present, in much of Western Christianity both Protestant and Catholic, the Sermon and Jesus' ethical teachings generally had come to receive *short shrift*. In their place:

¹ [*Kingdom Ethics, 2nd ed.: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*](#), David P. Gushee, Glen H. Stassen, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 91.

- *on the one hand*, we find a conservative *moralism* and *legalism* that too often adopt authoritarian ideologies from the surrounding culture;
 - *on the other hand*, there emerged a culture-accommodating *liberalism* and self-seeking *individualism*.
- Some historians actually draw a direct line between Martin Luther and the Aryan Nationalism of Hitler. Some commentators draw a similar line to the White Nationalism of Trump.

One asks: *What went so wrong about The Sermon on the Mount?*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called sidestepping the Sermon *cheap grace*, namely, Christians want to congratulate themselves

- that they are forgiven or “justified,” without repenting—a kind of legal fiction;
- that God is on their side, without needing to follow the way of God as revealed in Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (*Discipleship*, 40, 45ff).²

2. Costly Discipleship not Cheap Grace: A Way of Deliverance Through “Transforming Initiatives”

So how do we recover in the Sermon on the Mount, specifically in today’s text, *costly discipleship* that avoids *cheap grace*? . . .

In response: What if the Sermon is read as *not making impossible personal* demands? What if instead it calls on the *whole community* to find *ways of deliverance* for all from unjust social structures? For in fact, every time Matthew has Jesus say “*You*” in this text, it is the Greek plural form, which indicates that he is addressing a **community of believers in a church setting who are figuring out together how to live in hostile circumstances**. In such an understanding, Jesus’ teachings urge taking collective actions of “**transforming initiatives**” in response to injustice.

So we are not faced with only *personal* “fight” or “flight” options in response to aggression. There is rather a *third way of collective nonviolent direct action to engage in*. One that:

- bypasses traditional vengeful ethics;
 - refuses sinful retaliation in endless cycles of violence;
 - and opens up new ways of being in the world; providing alternative “**transforming initiatives**” to be taken.
- **Esther:** Today’s text presents illustrative examples of this, and there are implied *endless situational possibilities*—limited only by willingness, imagination, opportunity, etc. They can be seen thus on two slides, *where a triad or threefold set of options is indicated by Jesus; with the third being Jesus’ way. There are fourteen such triads in the Sermon. Notice:*³

² *ibid*, p. 94.

³ *ibid*, p. 98.

➤ First there is Traditional Righteousness:

Matthew 5:38: “You have heard that it was said, ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*’ ”

Matthew 5:43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*’ ”

Second there are Sinful Patterns or Vicious Cycles:

Matthew 5:39: “But I say to you, *do not retaliate revengefully by evil means.*”

Matthew 5:46–47: “For if you *love those who love you*, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you *salute only your brethren*, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

➤ Third and Jesus’ way are Transforming Initiatives:

Matthew 5:39–42: “But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, *turn the other also*; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic (undergarment), *give your cloak as well*; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, *go also the second mile. Give to one* who begs from you, and *do not refuse one* who would borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:44–45: “But I say to you, *Love your enemies* and *pray for those who persecute you*, so that you may be sons of your 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.*”

In this reading: The text is not a kind of tactical guide to individual self-defence in response to attack by say, a mugger; a rapist; a murderer; etc. There are elsewhere biblical reasons for not doing lethal violence to such. We are suggesting though that this text is *not primarily* about that.

Rather, it relates

- to chronic situations of oppressive, unjust relationships such as colonial trauma suffered by our Indigenous neighbours;
- the Palestinians under Israeli occupation;
- entrenched racism;
- gender and sexual orientation injustices;
- etc. Sadly, the list is always long.

The three situations in the text about cheek, cloak, and mile are in fact real-life examples from Roman-occupied Palestine.

- Striking one on the right cheek was a common action of contempt, an insult towards another. It can only mean a back-handed slap by the right hand, because the left hand was for unclean tasks, and thus never used. It was not about common assault on the left cheek, or worse. Offering the other cheek—with perhaps a wry smile—*challenges the aggressor to acknowledge the dignity of the one slapped.*
- Giving the cloak as well when taken to court and sued, where the undergarment is demanded as collateral, potentially embarrasses the plaintiff. In that day, no Jewish citizen could look on a naked person in public; and no one should seize and keep a person’s cloak because it could

be needed as a night blanket. *Though naked then, such a person stands before the court with self-respect intact.*

- A soldier could by Roman law press a Jew into service to carry his baggage one statutory mile. It was strictly forbidden to force him to go further, and if so it could lead to disciplinary action against the soldier. *Cheerfully going the second mile seizes the initiative from the oppressor, thereby also seizing the day with reaffirmed self-worth.*

Wayne: A preferred paraphrase in this light to “*Do not resist evil*”—read earlier—suggested by various commentators, goes something like: “*But I say to you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means.*”

With that, a way to *alternative nonviolent action* opens up! This is where “*transforming initiatives*” can be resorted to.

And suddenly we are in the company of two 20th-century master practitioners of this *non-retaliatory martial-arts-like political art form*: **Mahatma Ghandi** and **Martin Luther King, Jr.**; **who unlike the other Martin Luther took the violent energy of their opponents and channelled it into good.** Just like Saint Paul said in Romans 12: “... *overcome evil with good.*”

For these community practices there was in Jesus’ Sermon *a grand empowerment and incentive to take bold initiatives for change!* And the injunction, “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” presents *not* an impossible counsel of perfection; rather it urges, like God, consistent loving *transforming initiatives* in response to injustice.

3. Stories

Esther: three years ago Wayne and I visited Rwanda during an [International CURE Conference](#). (CURE works internationally on prisoner rights and prison reform. Wayne is the Canadian representative.) We went to *Mbyo Unity and Reconciliation Village*. It was one of eight such in existence established by Prison Fellowship Rwanda. What began as an experiment in a pilot project in 2003, by 2018 had 8 Villages, 820 homes, and over 4,000 families of survivors and perpetrators living side by side.

I want to tell some of the stories we heard.

a. Reconciliation Villages

- Rain falls gently in Rwanda as *Frederick*, standing just outside our covered shelter, gives his barebones testimony. He was 26 when the genocide started. The roads to escape the village were blocked. He found victims hiding in the sorghum fields and killed them. He says:

I was in prison for 9 years. Two pastors came into prison and took us through a journey to know the value of a human and a journey of repentance. First to God, then victims, then the

country as a whole. The President released us. Then we went in front of victims and admitted and repented. It was very hard.

Jeannette (pictured) speaks next:

On April 8th they killed my parents; I was 16. I lost all my relatives. We went into exile for two months to hide. After we were freed I wanted to die. When the president released the prisoners, we were so afraid. Pastor came and told us that the men who had been released would be coming back to our village. When we saw them, we were in great pain, a day of tears. We sat across from each other. The time came when they confessed and showed us where the bodies were. We took time to pray and get close to God. Now I am not afraid. When I have to go away I leave my children with one of the murderers. The wives of those who did the killing didn't believe it. We weave baskets together and talk. Now they believe. We have come back to life. We are not worried. Please communicate what happened, that it was real.

Then it is *Claudine's* turn:

I am younger and was born to one of the victims. I asked why they survived. They hid, and then fled to Burundi. Those who committed the crimes confessed to my parents. Now the wives weave together; and we meet in clubs, go to school, and play games and dance together.

And finally, *another teen* explains:

Every day my mother was taking food to a place I didn't know. Finally, she explained that my dad was in prison. She said that he had killed Tutsis. I asked her why. She explained that Tutsis have long noses . . . My father came back. Now we don't have any Tutsi and Hutu, we are all simply Rwandan.

Following the Conference, Wayne and I stayed on for two months and heard many more stories. We volunteered with three post-genocide restorative justice initiatives in Rwanda, and visited a few more times some other Reconciliation Villages.

We observed. We conversed. And we learned lots. Above all, this: *the worst kind of enemies—murderers—can become friends of murder victims' families, and live well together!*

To our awareness, there is nothing quite like this elsewhere. Members of these Villages have chosen to step *beyond forgiveness and indeed embrace reconciliation.* They have committed to living together, working together, and caring for one another. Offenders in fact built the homes and have been doing farming for the widows as part of their penance. The pilot project was a great success, and has given rise to ever-expanding initiatives. Other countries have sent delegations to learn more.

In every way it has been a genuine *transforming initiative* over against decades of colonial-induced conflict that ultimately led to the 1994 genocide of over a million people.

Wayne: My friend **Vern Redekop**, has published much on international conflict, as well on post-genocide Rwanda⁴. He describes what is happening at such Villages as a “*justice of blessing*,” in which perpetrators commit themselves to take actions at the community’s direction to make amends to the surviving family victims. Such transforming structures can then become infectious with all in the community benefitting.

Justice of Blessing and Restoration takes the place of *Justice of Violence and Retribution*. What these Reconciliation Villages have discovered in fact is a *new power to create alternative relational structures of communal peace*.

4. The Irony of Power

Mennonite theologian **Dorothy Weaver**, who has done extensive work in Palestine, says these powerful eruptions of community structures of blessing point to “*the irony of power*.”⁵ She explains in her book on Matthew by that title that there and throughout the New Testament, the Romans and their Jewish collaborators seemingly held all the power. For instance:

- John was executed;
- Jesus was crucified;
- the early Christians were persecuted;
- etc.

Ironically though, according to all the New Testament writers, *it is in fact Jesus and the community of the faithful who emerge victorious*. Why? Because they found a way to faithfully live out **The Greatest Commandment**; to *set into action the central thrust of our text: Love your enemies*. She writes:

The implications are revolutionary. . . “The servile refuse to be humiliated; the subjugated take initiative by acting with dignity and humanity in the midst of and against injustice and oppression which seem permanent.”⁶

Doesn’t this sound like the three “**transforming initiatives**” of turning the other cheek, offering the cloak, and going the second mile? . . .

Esther: 5. More Stories:

And again, from Dorothy Weaver, we hear a few Christian Palestinian voices:

Amal (whose name means hope) and her extended family tend their farm tenaciously and creatively, host international work groups that volunteer on the land, organize children’s

⁴ [A Post-Genocidal Justice of Blessing as an Alternative to a Justice of Violence: *The Case of Rwanda*](#)” (published in Barry Hart (ed.), *Peacebuilding in Traumatized Societies*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2008, pp. 205- 241.)

⁵ [The Irony of Power: The Politics of God within Matthew's Narrative](#).

⁶ *ibid.*

camps, run computer classes in the nearby village, provide space for Israeli/Palestinian dialogue, and offer seminars about nonviolent defense of Palestinian lands. And for Amal even enormous setbacks can be transformed into victories.

She tells with joy and clear emphasis:

“Israeli settlers uprooted 350 trees, but we replanted 700 trees!” And she continues, “A Jewish group came and sponsored 100 olive trees and planted them with their own hands!” Such hope-filled actions draw the immediate attention of both enemies and friends alike. After the olive trees were replanted, Israeli settlers came back, asking angrily, “Why did you replant the olive trees?” But a Muslim woman asked me, “From where do you have this patience? I want to come and learn every day.”

Another woman, Jean, says:

You can’t preach love of the enemy in isolation. The inner and the outer go together.

Rana further notes:

It’s everything. It’s not segmented or compartmentalized. It’s the whole life.

And for Nora:

Our whole life leads us slowly and gradually to the divine. [And] every experience we have in loving the enemy leads us closer to that image.⁷

Finally in Amal’s words again—*that can sum up the thrust of today’s text*:

Such hope-filled action becomes, *ironically*, “a *power* that you cannot resist,” and a *power* that serves ultimately to “break the cycle of violence.”⁸

Though our generally peaceful middle-class circumstances in Canada are vastly more favourable for so many of us, our living in a shrinking Global Village beset by violence points us in light of today’s passage towards imaginative counter-intuitive ways of doing power in the world. In the LMF context, the work of Mennonite Central Committee is classic instance.

May we all take heart. May we also all take part!

Jesus and the irony of power. Amen.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*