

*Turn the Other Cheek*

Psalm 27

March 17, 2019

Rev. Tom VandeStadt

Congregational Church of Austin, UCC

He is, in sum, not looking for a kingdom for himself or anyone else where God imposes the divine will on the world. Rather, he is inaugurating God's domination-free order.

Walter Wink, from *The Powers That Be*

Two weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, we read that Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop, and the voice from the cloud said, this is my son, listen to him!

So we did. We listened to Jesus, to what he taught, his instructions.

Afterward, during joys and concerns, Jane, you said you couldn't accept Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek when someone strikes your right cheek. I get the impression that the instruction to turn the other cheek disturbs you deeply, deeply enough to publically raise it as a concern. I suspect you're not alone. And I understand why you and others would find that instruction impossible to accept.

I'd like to revisit that instruction this morning, turn the other cheek, and reflect on how it might resonate with the 27<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

In the Bible—the Torah, the psalms, the prophets—we read repeatedly that God liberates the slaves, lifts up the downtrodden, rescues the doomed. A central theme running through this literature is that God supports those who're dominated, not those who dominate, the oppressed, not the oppressor.

So it's striking, and disturbing, when Jesus gives instructions that we could interpret to mean the dominated should cooperate with the dominator by inviting the dominator to dominate them even more.

When they strike you, invite them to strike you again.

When they step on you, invite them to walk all over you.

Is that what Jesus meant?

If so, it's horrible. Repulsive.

If that's what Jesus meant, then I'm with Jane, I can't accept it.

But I don't think that's what Jesus meant.

I don't think Jesus instructed people on the receiving end of violence to invite further acts of violence against them, the oppressed to invite their oppressor to oppress them more. Such a teaching contradicts the Jesus I know, and the Jewish spirituality that shaped him.

I think Jesus spoke for, and acted on behalf of, the God who liberates the slaves, lifts up the downtrodden, and rescues the doomed. Like God, Jesus supported the dominated, not the dominator, the abused, not the abuser.

I think Jesus' instruction to turn the others cheek was actually a subversive message of defiance, of non-violent resistance, directed at people who found themselves dominated by other people.

I think Jesus was telling them, stand up for yourselves, assert yourselves.

Affirm your God-given equality, your God-given dignity.

Do not internalize, do not accept, the idea that you're inferior to anyone, that you're unequal to anyone.

I think that's what Jesus meant by turn the other cheek.

Theologian, Walter Wink, helps me interpret Jesus' instruction this way.

Wink writes that in the culture in which Jesus and his contemporaries lived, a person of superior status struck people of inferior status by slapping the right cheek with their left hand.

A quick left-handed slap across the right cheek was a common way for dominant people to communicate, assert, and maintain their dominance over those they dominated. This simple act of violence could be carried out by masters against slaves, husbands against wives, parents against children, Romans against Jews.

And the dominated were expected to take it. To accept the slap, the rebuke, the humiliation. To be put in one's place. To internalize one's inferior status.

Jesus instructs his followers, turn the other cheek when someone strikes your right cheek. Turn and show your left cheek to the person who slapped you.

Why?

Because to hit you now, this person must strike you with their right hand. And only equals strike one another with their right hand.

Turn the other cheek.

It doesn't mean, let those who dominate you dominate you even more.

It means, do not consent to anyone's dominance over you.

Do not accept the status of inferior and unequal.

Recognize your own equality, and insist that people treat you as an equal.

Turn the other cheek is a metaphor for actively subverting and defying, in non-violent ways, any and all of the conventional and routine ways those who dominate communicate, assert, and maintain their dominance over others. It's a metaphor for non-violently refusing to cooperate with one's own oppression by rejecting the status of inferior and unequal.

African-American athletes taking a knee during the national anthem is a contemporary form of turning the other cheek. It's a refusal to accept that black lives don't matter as much as white lives.

Taking a knee, turning the other cheek, doesn't necessarily end the oppression, it doesn't necessarily end the relationship of dominance.

It probably won't.

And it may get you fired, blacklisted, or crucified.

Turning the other cheek simply communicates that you refuse to acknowledge the other person's right to dominate you.

I find this interpretation of turn the other cheek to be consistent with the Jesus I know, the spiritual tradition that formed him, and the God for whom Jesus spoke and acted.

I believe Jesus taught that in God's kingdom here on earth, in God's way of living in community here on earth, no one dominates anyone. So starting now, do not dominate other people. And starting now, do not cooperate when someone tries to dominate you. Refuse to acknowledge the other person's right to cast you in the role of inferior and unequal.

Turn the other cheek. Take a knee.

Even if it's the last thing you ever do, the last stand you ever make.

Jane, thank you for lifting up Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek for further scrutiny. I'm not saying Walter Wink's interpretation is the correct one. I simply offer it for your consideration. It's one I find helpful. And for me, it resonates with Psalm 27.

When I read Psalm 27, I hear two voices.

Not two different people speaking, but one person speaking with two different voices.

We're all familiar with the phenomenon of hearing different parts of ourselves speaking, the phenomenon of internal debate, or of thinking one thing with an internal voice, and saying something different with our external voice.

That's what I detect in this psalm.

One person. Two parts, two voices.

One voice talks *about* God. The other voice talks *to* God.

The voice that talks *about* God is focused outward. It's more bravado. This voice declares to the world, the Lord is my light, whom shall I fear?

The voice that talks *to* God is focused inward. It's more desperate. It cries out to God, I'm surrounded by enemies. Help me God! Don't forsake me! Save me!

One person. Two parts.

Outward—brave, faithful, fearless. Inward—a cry to God for help.

To me, this could be a person who's right cheek has just been struck, and who in response has turned the other cheek.

This person, in a profound outward and visible act of bravery, is conveying to the one who struck, I refuse to grant you the right to dominate me.

I am not your inferior. I am your equal.

And I do not fear you, because God is my stronghold.

But as this person bravely, defiantly, non-violently turns the other cheek, I also hear this person's heart crying out to God, help me! Don't forsake me! Save me, God, from this calamity!

One person, two parts.

Outward—a show of courageous faith and fearlessness in the face of one's enemy.

Inward—a cry to God for help.

Here's the image I get when I reflect on Psalm 27 in light of turning the other cheek. I picture young African-American men and women sitting at a segregated southern lunch counter, surrounded by young white men and women who're taunting them, jeering at them, pouring cream and sugar over their heads.

By sitting at that lunch counter, these young African-American men and women are turning the other cheek.

Outwardly, they're saying to the white people surrounding them, we refuse to accept your right to dominate us.

Outwardly, they're saying to all white people, we refuse to accept that we are inferior and unequal to you.

Outwardly, they're saying, we do not fear you, because God is our stronghold.

But I can also hear some internal voices coming from some of their hearts, internal voices crying out to God as they sit there defying the abuse. God help me! I'm surrounded by enemies. Don't forsake me, God! Save me!

Turning the other cheek—outwardly, publically, defiantly, non-violently refusing to cooperate with one's oppressors—it takes a tremendous amount of bravery. And for some, this outward show of bravery comes in response to their inward call to God. Their plea, their cry—God, be my light, my stronghold. Save me, God, from my enemies who surround me.

Relationships of domination take many forms. There are countless ways people communicate, assert, and maintain their dominance over other people.

Sometimes the dominance is overt and obvious, sometimes it's subtle and hidden.

It's societal in scope, and it's personal. Groups of people dominate other groups of people, and individuals dominate other individuals.

The left-handed slap across the right cheek can serve as a metaphor for all the different forms dominant relationships take.

And turn the other cheek can serve as a metaphor for all the different forms non-violent resistance takes. All the different ways people refuse to accept that they're inferior and unequal, even if it's the last thing they do.

It's good to pay close attention to our own lives.

To our own behavior.

To the quality of our relationships, how we treat other people, how other people treat us.

Are there relationships, societal in scope or personal, in which we communicate, assert, and maintain our dominance over other people or another person?

Maybe openly and obviously?

Maybe in ways subtle and hidden, even from ourselves, until we look, and notice, and acknowledge?

Are there relationships, societal or personal, in which other people communicate, assert, and maintain their dominance over us?

Openly and obviously?

Or in way subtle and hidden, even from ourselves, until we look, notice, and acknowledge?

May we commit ourselves to learn how to release our dominance over other people, and by doing so, come closer to the way of living in community that Jesus called God's kingdom.

May we commit to non-violently defy, and seek to liberate ourselves from, those who dominate us, and by doing so, come closer to living in God's kingdom here on earth.

May we commit to be allies with one another in our sacred commitment to end domination in all relationships.

And may we call out to God:

Sacred spirit who liberates, uplifts, rescues,

be our light, guide us,

so that we may know how to speak and act on your behalf  
in this world.

Be our stronghold, remain with us,

so that we may be brave enough to speak and act on your behalf

in this world.