

## **Becoming a Cheek-Turning People**

Epiphany 7: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; Psalm 119:33-40;

1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Gary Eichelberger – Christ Church Cathedral (February 23, 2014)

We are a people called to respond with love. But, of course, that is much easier said than done. Nonetheless, discerning what it means to respond with love – and then doing it – is the work of our lives as members of Christ's body the Church.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus very clearly commanding his disciples – and through them us – that we are to respond to violence with love—to oppression with love—to persecution with love. In doing so, Jesus teaches his disciples what such love looks like: a refusal to meet violence with violence, a willingness to give to those who take from us, an offer to bear the load of those who have unfairly burdened us, and a commitment to pray for those who persecute us.

Instead of providing his listeners with a strategy for winning according to the world's calculations, for defeating their enemies, for righting the wrongs, for overthrowing the powers that oppress them, Jesus gives them this peculiar advice:

[I]f 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.

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'"

Jesus did not merely offer these words as food for thought in the Sermon on the Mount. He would, in his life and death, exemplify these commandments. Jesus turned the other cheek, gave up his cloak, went the extra mile, loved his enemies, and prayed for those who persecuted him. All of these things, he did as he journeyed to the Cross.

And, if the Crucifixion were the end of the story, then it would seem that cheek-turning, cloak-giving, and extra-mile-walking were not very advisable strategies for dealing with evil. But "death [can] be not proud" for that was not the end of the story. Instead, Jesus triumphed over evil through his suffering—by refusing to retaliate—and in doing so overcame death and the grave.

And, in rising from the dead, he returned to his disciples and charged them with the following words of the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..., and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (28:20).

Amongst his commandments were the familiar instructions that we heard in today's Gospel.

And, as those who claim to be his disciples today—who claim continuity with those disciples who were thereby commissioned, we are called to be a people known for our cheek-turning, for our cloak-giving, for going the extra mile, for loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us.

But, in certain respects, we are in a very different position from those people that gathered around Jesus from the Galilean countryside. They were Hebrew people, under Roman occupation – dominated by the most powerful political entity in the world.

Jesus told an apparently powerless people to reject retribution and to give more than demanded from those with power over them.

And now he tells us the same.

But, how are we powerless?

Who is striking our cheek?

Who is suing for our coat?

Who is unjustly demanding that we carry their load for a mile?

No doubt the disciples and the crowd who heard Jesus would have had little difficulty in answering these questions.

We, on the other hand, are privileged citizens of a powerful country. Though some of us may have ancestors who were oppressed or enslaved (and a few of us may continue to experience forms of political injustice), more of us – myself included – have little or no lineage with the oppressed. Thus, it is much easier for me – as someone who has been privileged by the structures of our society – to argue that we must always turn the other cheek – no one is hitting me.

So, if many of us were to place ourselves within this narrative, we might then need to also ask:

Whose cheek are we guilty of striking?

For whose coat have we sued?

By whom have we unjustly demanded that our load be carried?

Who do we persecute?

In other words, to the extent that we have a position from which we exercise power over others, are we exercising that power with love?

If we are complicit in systems of oppression and persecution, whether through error or neglect, can we identify the ways in which we are contributing to injustice—and then find ways to right our own wrongs?

To the extent that our own power and privilege is thereby diminished, perhaps we can begin to better understand the radical nature of Christ's call to refuse to retaliate.

And God might then begin to expand our imagination such that we would see in the heroic refusal to retaliate a more powerful narrative. We could see in stories of non-violent resistance to evil a more inspiring witness than could ever be offered by stories of revenge and retribution.

In order to remain faithful to Christ's command, we must remind ourselves that, throughout the history of the Church, such stories are extraordinary but not uncommon. They are the stories of saints.

Stories of individuals – some not unlike us – who have found the strength necessary to resist the temptation to meet violence with violence – refused to calculate the just deserts of the oppressor and the persecutors – individuals who, to paraphrase the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., understand the need for us to “overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.”

Just days after arriving at seminary at Sewanee this past August, I climbed on board a bus in the seminary parking lot in the early morning hours to travel with a group of fellow Episcopalians to the small town of Hayneville, Alabama, to celebrate just such a story – the life, witness, and martyrdom of Jonathan Myrick Daniels.

Having come from a privileged white, New England family, Daniels was not someone whom many would have expected to suffer martyrdom in the impoverished Black Belt of Alabama. But Daniels was a 26-year old Episcopal seminarian when he answered Dr. King's call for Christians, black and white, to offer a non-violent witness against the evils of racism and segregation. Thus, in the spring of 1965, Daniels traveled from the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts to Selma, Alabama, to participate in the march on the state capital. Initially, he only planned to spend a weekend there, but, once he was in Alabama, he felt called to stay.

When questioned about wisdom and safety of his decision to remain, Daniels explained that the Holy Spirit had called him to remain there to witness to Christ's reconciling love. Assured of the power of the resurrection, Daniels wrote that “the

possibility of death, whether immediate or remote, [could not] be a deciding factor” for him.

As a result of his work against segregation, Daniels was shot and killed after placing himself between a shotgun-wielding segregationist and an African American teenager. He offered his cheek in place of another. And he was martyred for it.

On the anniversary of his martyrdom, forty-eight years later, our bus pulled into the small town where Daniels, through his actions, gave testimony to the power of the risen Christ. And we walked in his footsteps and we gave thanks for his witness—and we prayed that God would give us the faith and the courage to love as Daniels did. And we remembered many other individuals who suffered on behalf of the oppressed during that time – some of whom died similar deaths, but some of whom were there walking with us.

In their work and witness, the church communities that formed and sustained individuals like Jonathan Myrick Daniels and Martin Luther King, Jr., were, no doubt, inspired by the hope that the suffering of the oppressed would be eased by their labors—and that hope has seen – in no small measure – some level of fulfillment.

However, they found their greatest strength in the knowledge that the ultimate victory had already been achieved upon the Cross. Likewise, the ultimate success of their witness lies not in the measure of freedom from bondage achieved by those oppressed—but rather in the faithfulness of their refusal to accept the tempting impulse toward retribution.

Following in their footsteps will never be easy. But that is the work that we have been given to do as we pray for the strength and courage to go into the world in Peace.