



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Make a Difference Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

Even though we are familiar with these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount and probably quote them every now and then, we are uncomfortably aware of how difficult they are at times to practice. If you have been slapped, it is not natural to stand there and offer the other cheek to your offender's hand. While we are happy to help someone in need, most of us draw the line at some point. Many of us, perhaps all of us, really do find it difficult to love our enemies, and I mean people who truly have it in for us. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" still sounds like a viable option—that is until we discover someone like Julio Diaz.

Mr. Diaz is a social worker in New York City who lives in the Bronx. For years it has been his pattern to come home at the end of a busy day, get off the subway one stop early, and eat at his favorite diner before heading home. In 2008, he told about an interruption in that pattern in a recording for *StoryCorps* that was broadcast on NPR's *Morning Edition*.

One evening as he stepped off the subway onto the platform, Mr. Diaz was confronted by a teenager with a knife. Assuming he wanted money, Mr. Diaz handed him his wallet and the young man walked away. Then Mr. Diaz called after him and said, "Hey, wait a minute, you forgot something. If you're gonna be robbing people for the rest of the night you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." It stunned the young man who asked him what he was trying to do. The social worker said he figured that if the young man was willing to risk his freedom then he must be desperate and really need help. He told him that his plan was to get some dinner and invited the young man to join him, which he did. The story continues in Mr. Diaz' words:

We sit down in a booth and the manager comes by, the dishwashers come by, the waiters come by to say hi, you know. So the kid is like, man, you know everybody here. Do you own this place? I'm like, no, I just eat here a lot. He said, but you're even nice to the dishwasher.

I'm like, well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody. So he's like, yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way. So I just asked him . . . what is it that you want out of life? He just had almost a sad face. Either he couldn't answer me or he didn't want to.

The bill came and I looked at him and I'm like, look, I guess you're gonna have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for this, so if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you. He didn't even think about it. He's like, yeah, okay, here you go.

So I got my wallet back. And . . . I gave him \$20 for, you know, I figure maybe it will help him, I don't know. And when I gave him the \$20 I asked him to give me something in return, which was his knife. And he gave it to me.

You know, it's funny 'cause when I told my mom about what happened . . . she was like, well . . . you're the type of kid that always if someone asked you for the time, you gave them your watch.

. . . I figure . . . you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world.¹

Surprisingly, the slap on the other cheek suddenly seems doable. The key is compassion and creativity and more than a little courage and wisdom.

Jesus related these teachings to his followers in order to help them respond to everyday situations. He was not teaching them about how to respond to violent attacks or even what to do when one nation takes up arms against another nation. He wanted to help people navigate the challenges of an ordinary day. Arguments were often accompanied by a slap in the face which challenged the both parties to defend their honor. Lawsuits over property were common. A Roman soldier had the authority to force a Jew to carry his armor down the road, but no more than a mile. The poor regularly begged for help. Enmity developed between people just as easily two thousand years ago as it does today. This past week, my hometown newspaper reported that a dispute over control of an accident scene led to a

¹Julio Diaz, "A Victim Treats His Mugger Right," *StoryCorps*, broadcast on NPR's *Morning Edition* (March 28, 2008), Copyright ©2008 NPR.

heated exchange between a volunteer fire chief and the county sheriff. The disagreement became physical, the fire chief and his brother were arrested, investigations have ensued, and racial tensions are rising because the firemen are white and the sheriff is black.

Jesus wanted his followers to learn how to react in such a way that simple situations would not become overblown. He wanted them to learn to diffuse explosive circumstances, to step back and determine whether aggression was wise, and to act out of compassion rather than anger and revenge.

When I was in middle school, during the last few days of the spring semester, two seventh grade girls got into an argument over a copy of the yearbook. Tempers flared. Angry and hurtful words were swapped. If I remember correctly, there might have even exchanged a couple of slaps to the cheeks. That evening word spread that a fight would take place after school the following day. Sure enough, tensions were sky high. When the bell rang, one of the girls left quickly and jumped into a carful of high school friends who were there to protect her. A crowd of people surged toward the car and one of the occupants in the back seat fired a shotgun into the air, sending students running in all directions. That afternoon, a large crowd of students marched through the city. It was not a protest, for there was nothing to protest. They were angry, but most of them did not even know why. What began as a simple disagreement quickly escalated into a major incident for our entire community. Turn the other cheek.

There on the mountainside, Jesus reminded his followers that minor issues can become major problems if we are not careful with our responses. Just a few weeks ago, a disagreement over texting during a movie resulted in a young man being shot to death and a retired police officer facing murder charges. And to think that they both went to the movie for entertainment. Turn the other cheek.

Jesus wanted his followers to make a positive difference in the world. We do not have to respond to rudeness, disrespect, or even aggression with more rudeness, disrespect, or aggression. Sometimes we can turn the other cheek and then walk away. Sometimes we can return hatred with love.

This weekend, my sister-in-law, who is a first grade teacher, reminded me of the story of a first grader who understood Jesus' words. Ruby Nell Bridges was seven years old in 1960 when she and five other black children were selected to integrate the all-white public schools of New Orleans. Two

of the children decided not to participate. Three were assigned to attend a school together, and Ruby was assigned to William Frantz Elementary School by herself. For a year, federal marshals drove her to school and escorted her safely into the building where she and her teacher Barbara Henry went over her lessons every day. None of the white parents sent their first graders to school that year. And every day as she walked into school, a crowd of angry white adults waved posters and hurled insults at that little seven year old girl. Years later she wrote about what happened one particular day. She said,

From her window, Mrs. Henry always watched me walk into school. One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people."

"I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for them." Usually I prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day I'd forgotten until I was in the crowd. "Please be with me," I'd asked God, "and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing."²

Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Love your enemies. It is when we see the words of Jesus transformed into acts of compassion, not only in his own life, but in the lives of people like you and me, that we discover their power.

Our SOS Sunday School Class is currently studying a fascinating book by Wendy Mogel titled *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. Dr. Mogel, a psychologist, discovered that some of the basic teachings of Judaism provide a foundational guide for parenting. For instance, this morning we discussed the importance of raising children who respect their parents and other people. Among the values that we discover in the Hebrew religion, which, we remember, was the faith of Jesus, are courtesy, kindness, respect, and hospitality.

Courtesy recognizes that each and every person is special as created by God. It diffuses potentially explosive situations and avoids bruised feelings. Kindness toward others considers what has happened in another person's life. Is their behavior the result of wrongs they have experienced? Are they stressed at home, at work, at school? Is their life beset by personal

²Ruby Bridges Hall, "The Education of Ruby Nell," *Guidepost* (March 2000); available online at: <http://www.rubybridges.com/story.html>.

turmoil? Kindness offers the benefit of the doubt rather than reacting with annoyance or anger.

Respect for other people considers that we are all the children of God and deserve to be treated as such. We honor people in authority over us such as our parents, teachers, supervisors, and leaders. We interact with everyone we meet in the manner in which we want to be treated, thus fulfilling the “Golden Rule” which Jesus himself recommended.

Hospitality is simply the attitude of being grateful and gracious. Because we have been blessed in life, we genuinely want to be a blessing to other people. We share our good fortune. We make other people feel welcome in our presence. We provide basic comforts and insure that others experience the feeling of being valued and appreciated.

By acting with courtesy, kindness, respect, and hospitality we can learn to offer the other cheek in order to avoid a bigger conflict. We can be generous toward others and help to meet their basic needs. We can go the extra mile and demonstrate our willingness to understand the needs of other people. And we can begin to find our way to love even those who hate us and would harm us.

Who knows what might happen if we choose to count to ten before we retaliate for a wrong done to us? Who knows what might change if we respond to rudeness with kindness? Who knows what might transpire if we act with grace when others do us wrong? Who knows what might happen if we seek forgiveness instead of harboring hatred? Who knows what might happen if we follow Jesus all the way to the cross on his journey? We might just discover a new kind of life on the other side.

Jesus came to live among us in order to change our world, but we need not think his focus was on spiritual salvation alone. Jesus desired that each and every day we spend on this earth be filled with goodness and joy. He wanted us to get along, to share our good fortune, and to celebrate this wonderful life that is ours. In addition to saving our souls, God in Christ wanted to redeem our days. There is more than enough anger, hatred, and revenge in our world. God wants more for us so Jesus came to show us how to love—not in a weak and timid way, but in a powerful, life-changing, world-transforming way. It is risky business and often begins with kindness and prayer for those who would do us in. But if God has his way, it ends with changed lives and open hearts. May God help us to live graciously today.

February 23, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

When you created us in your image, you gave us bodies and minds and personalities that are varied and complex, O God. You created us with great potentials: the ability to love and be loved, to understand and to be understood, to give and to receive, to hurt and to be hurt, to be creative and to enjoy creativity, to learn and to teach, to give and receive life. We pray that you will further enable us to take that which you have given us and shape it carefully into the life you have hoped for us.

We pray for our faith. Through many good and concerned people you have communicated your love for us and we have believed in you. We have faith, O God, but there are times when we are not quite certain about what we believe. There are times when the pressures and the pains of everyday living or the boredom of routines push us into a corner and force us to consider our faith. Help us, kind Father, to face our doubts with courage and to rethink our beliefs with conviction so that our faith might grow more resilient with the passing of each event in life. Aid us as we seek to be believers, O God.

We pray for a willingness to learn and mature in this adventure of faith. Keep us from the crippling sin of arrogance and make us humble so that each new day may bring new insights and each new night might end with gratitude for your kindness. Grant to us an awareness of our sin, a sorrow for our wrongdoing, and an openness to your forgiveness. Heal us of the injuries we have inflicted upon ourselves and enable us to offer healing for the pain we have caused others. Help us to be humble, O God.

We pray for the energy and creativity needed to be faithful through your church. Many are the needs which confront us. Overwhelming are the issues that challenge us. We seek your power of love that we might communicate your Gospel to the world. We pray for those who are ill and unable to care for themselves as they once did. We pray for those who have been halted by the limitations of body or mind. We pray for those who have had life ripped apart by relationships turned sour. We pray for those who are lonely and sad. We pray for our world threatened by misguided energies and selfish motives and for all who get in the way of their destructive paths. We pray for the hopeless and the helpless. And we pray, our Father, that as good citizens of your kingdom, we will find ourselves as part of the answer to these prayers.

We pray for the openness of heart and mind to receive your good news and announce it to others. Assist us as we use all of the gifts you have given to us—heart, mind, soul, and strength—as we interpret your love to our world. These prayers we make in the name of the Christ who is love incarnate among us. Amen.