

Stand-Your-Ground – Jesus’ Way

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

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

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.” – Matthew 5:38-39a

Prayer

**God of creation, Maker of the human race,
Bless this moment of meditation,
Enlarge our hearts with the Good News
And surprise us once again with our calling
To be more Christ-like.
In Christ, hear our prayer. Amen.**

Dacher Keltner, professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley and Director of the Greater Good Science Center, wrote an intriguing book wherein he claims, very convincingly, that the “*survival of the kindest may be just as fitting a description of [human evolution] as [the] survival of the fittest.*”¹ Opposing the views of early British evolutionary theorist Thomas Henry Huxley who proposed that human nature forged by the forces of evolution had to be essentially selfish, aggressive and violent, Keltner argues that built into our evolutionary makeup are powerful emotions like love, compassion, gratitude, and kindness. “*Clearly we are wired to pursue self-interest, to compete, and to be vigilant to the bad,*” Keltner writes, “*those tendencies make evolutionary sense, they are built into our genes and nervous systems. They are part of human nature. But that is... only part of our story.*”²

The other part of our story, which Keltner believes to be even more relevant to our evolutionary success, is our very capacity for goodness.³ This built-in goodness has contributed much more to human evolution than just an increase in our chances of survival and reproduction; as moral philosophers like Martha Nussbaum insist, goodness is at the core of our moral ideals and concepts of ethical living. Our capacity to be good has given our species the ability to care for one another; to work together; to be kind to completely unrelated strangers; to live in complex social patterns of relationships and hierarchies; to better negotiate conflict; to seek reconciliation; to show sympathy; to feel inspired by the good acts of others; and even to forgive. In essence, goodness has allowed humankind to establish the foundations of moral communities where concerns over fairness, right and wrong, kindness, peace, and love have become the basis for our search for a meaningful existence.

¹ Dacher Keltner. “*Born to be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life,*” loc. 68 [Kindle edition]

² Ibid, loc. 279

³ Ibid, loc. 919

Our own Judeo-Christian religious tradition has devoted much time and energy to understand and explain these two sides of human nature. The Genesis account of what has been traditionally known as “the Fall” of the first human pair was our very initial attempt at spelling out the undeniable reality of the tension that lies within every human heart. The forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil reflects the immense possibilities that humanity has to be good and to do good as well as our tendencies to pursue and maximize our self-interests, to compete, to be violent and, sometimes, to commit unthinkable evils.

This unsolvable duality of the human condition has mesmerized Christian thinkers throughout the ages! St. Augustine, whose writings have shaped much of our tradition and thought on the essence of human nature, believed that humans are inescapably flawed. Having had our original goodness corrupted by Adam’s And Eve’s choice to bite into the fruit of knowledge, Augustine concluded that, without God’s guidance, we would only be free to choose between lesser goods.

Centuries later, Calvinism came along and placed great emphasis on the thought of our corrupted nature by forcefully stating humanity’s total moral and spiritual corruption. Known in the Reformed Church as one of Calvinism’s tenets, “Total Depravity” came to be understood as our inability to be good without placing our twisted self-interests ahead of God and others. In the light of this Calvinist teaching, humans, despite all the progress we may have made, are still tediously the same; we continue to live trapped by existential anxiety, divisions within ourselves, and self-contradictions that result in broken relationships and in our inclination to be violent.

Even more progressive theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr struggled with the paradoxical nature of humankind. Believing that sin is endemic to the human condition in history, Niebuhr described human beings in a very brilliant manner as creatures that are both spirit and matter, good and wicked, free and bound, finite and infinitely free to imagine new possibilities for human life. And it is exactly these dizzying contradictions that, in Niebuhr’s views, create the unrelenting tension under which all of us must live. While every human being has the will to live fully, to be free and to do good, our creaturely existence undermines our best intentions, disrupts the harmony of life and entices humankind to assert our self-interests, to compete and to harm others as well as the environment.

Jesus himself chose to place all his bets on the human potential for goodness. His Sermon on the Mount, which last Sunday I defined as being hyperbolic and purposely exaggerated, is Jesus’ plainspoken message about his faith in our capacity to do good even in the most challenging circumstances.

He started his sermon pronouncing blessings on peacemakers, the pure in heart, the poor in spirit and on those who are persecuted on his account. Then, Jesus told the crowds that they are salt on earth and light in the world. As if all this had not been enough, Jesus also reminded the people listening to his sermon that their righteousness had to be above and beyond that of the most religious and pious group of people they knew at that time, the Pharisees. To make things even crazier, Jesus said that it was not enough to accept conventional religious beliefs or social conventions; he insisted that human beings could and should learn to live, to believe and to love in ways that transcended what had been previously the norm in their society. And this morning, Jesus pushes the envelope a bit

farther by saying that we should not resist an evildoer, but should give without expecting anything in return, and, on top of all that, we should love even our enemies! This is how much Jesus believed in our capacity for goodness!!

This high-minded idealism that Jesus preached has been quickly and unsurprisingly dismissed as being impractical in the real world. The late biblical scholar and theologian Walter Wink once said that even those who have committed their lives to working for justice and human transformation listen to Jesus' words in today's gospel reading and reject them as being too passive, too weak, a doormat kind of Christian faith.⁴

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche recognized the immense power in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and saw in it the potential for a fundamentally different world order and yet he consciously chose to oppose Jesus' teaching for being unnatural, unrealistic and impossible to be actualized in human history. Nietzsche believed very strongly that if European culture were to achieve greatness it needed myths of power and heroism and not the teachings of a Jewish idealist that were bound to keep humanity like slaves and sheep. Eventually, Nietzsche told his contemporaries that they would have to choose between Jesus' vision of a world order based on the human capacity for goodness and the great mythic gods of Greece and Germany, which we now know are the tribal gods of economic and political power. To bear the responsibility of progress and evolution, Nietzsche claimed, human conscience and heart would have to be made into steel and brass.

Still, the words of Christ on the Sermon on the Mount have persisted and they continue to call into question the concept of "***an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.***" Regardless of what the great minds of the world may say or believe, Jesus' words echo through the centuries and question the widely accepted reality of the world that is based on violent human interactions, our irrational love of guns, our tendency to believe that the only way to resist evil is with more evil. Jesus' overstated message keeps coming back each time we read his Sermon on the Mount to remind us that in a world that relies on the retributive concept of justice of "***an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,***" everybody ends up blind and toothless, angry and deeply alienated from one another.⁵

Violence, aggressiveness, and selfishness may be in our DNA, but the Gospel lesson this morning makes us stop to remember once again that goodness, kindness, love, and forgiveness are even more important emotions to human evolution. It may not be clearly stated in the passage we read, but Jesus is not calling Christians - people of faith like you and me - to be helplessly submissive, even compliant, to the violence and injustices that we witness in the world every day. As British Christian activist Noel Noules puts it, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is calling us to engage in "***assertive gentleness.***"⁶ He is asking us to dismantle a culture of steel conscience and brass hearts with a radical commitment to a more peaceful, caring, gentle, and just global community. Jesus is hoping that we will trust our capacity for goodness to cultivate real structural changes in our society in such a way

⁴ Paul Rogat Loeb, editor. "*The Impossible Will Take a Little While – Jesus and Alinsky* by Walter Wink," p. 149. [adapted]

⁵ Stanley P. Saunders. "*Preaching the Gospel of Matthew,*" p. 43.

⁶ Noel Moules. "*Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace: a Spiritual Manifesto,*" p. 131 [Kindle edition]

that systemic racism will not quietly justify the loss of young African-American lives to gun violence under the guise of Stand-Your-Ground laws. In fact, our Holy Scriptures this morning are instructing us to stand our ground as Jesus would by choosing to upset this current world order with nonviolent, creative, kind and hope-filled acts of assertive gentleness.

It may sound foolish, impractical, absurd, but as Walter Wink said so skillfully, ***“Jesus did not tell his oppressed hearers not to resist evil. His entire ministry is at odds with such a preposterous idea. He is, rather, warning against responding to evil in kind by letting the oppressor set the terms of our opposition... a proper translation of Jesus’ teaching would then be, ‘Do not retaliate against violence with violence.’***⁷

She was only 6 years-old, Ruby Bridges that is, when she became the first poor African-American child to face a hostile southern society. Renowned, Harvard educated child psychiatrist Robert Coles interviewed Ruby and wrote, ***“For days that turned into weeks and weeks that turned into months, this child had to brave murderously heckling mobs, there in the morning and there in the evening, hurling threats, and slurs and hysterical denunciations and accusations. Federal marshals took her to school and brought her home. She attended school all by herself for a good part of the school year... a woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him that she prays for those people, the ones in that mob, every night before she goes to sleep!”***

“... The minister told Ruby that if she forgives the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything; ‘I asked her,’ Robert Coles said, ‘if she believed the minister was on the right track. ‘O, yes,’ she said; and then came a kind explanation for the benighted, agnostic, Yankee visitor: ‘I am sure God knows what’s happening. He’s got a lot to worry about, but there is trouble here, and he can’t help but notice...’⁸

Pondering on the spiritual and emotional strength of little Ruby, Coles wrote at the end of the chapter he dedicated to his interview with her, ***“... little Ruby, who had taken no courses in moral analysis or systematic ethics. She hadn’t read the books we treasure. Yet somehow she walked through that mob praying for those people. Every day... quoting from the Bible. And quoting those statements, those sayings, those stories that Jesus uttered in Galilee... I am not about to argue for some kind of anti-intellectualism. But we do have a lot to learn about what makes for good people in the living of life.”***⁹

And Jesus said, ***“Do not retaliate against violence with violence... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”*** which is the same to say: stand your ground with assertive gentleness for human evolution - our evolution, this country’s evolution - rests on our capacity for goodness. Amen.

⁷ Paul Rogat Loeb, editor. *“The Impossible Will Take a Little While – Jesus and Alinsky by Walter Wink,”* p. 150.

⁸ Robert Coles. *“Lives We Carry With Us: Profiles of Moral Courage,”* pp. 204-206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-212.