

7th Sunday after the Epiphany....February 20, 2011
 Christ Church Episcopal, Harwichport
 The Very Rev. Malcolm McDowell, Assisting Priest

Let us pray: Now, O Lord....Now
 Calm us into a quietness and resolve
 That heals
 And listens,
 And molds our longings
 And passions,
 Our wounds and wonderings,
 Into a more holy
 And human
 Shape. AMEN

What is one thing you remember Jesus telling us today? I'll put my money on that you might remember that we should not take "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth" but that we must, if someone 'strikes us on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...' And then there is that line from Fiddler on the Roof: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" and pretty soon we'll be blind and toothless!!

I would venture to say that most of us think that such advice is naïve....if not down right dangerous. We point out how impractical it is giving extreme and far-out examples to prove such advice impractical.....*What would happen if someone breaks into my house and is about to murder my family; am I supposed sit by passively and see what will happen? Or....what about my responsibility to defend my country in the event of war?*

Now, while I appreciate the difficulty of applying this ethical standard in such cases, I would strongly suggest that most contentious circumstances are not nearly as extreme as these.

If you think you can't turn the other cheek on some of the hurts and slights that come your way, consider how difficult it must have been for Claude A. Wesley, the principal of a black elementary school in Birmingham, Alabama. One Sunday morning his little girl, Cynthia, went to Sunday School dressed in her best church clothes. Ironically, the Bible lesson that morning was about Joseph and what he teaches us about forgiveness.

Cynthia never came home. This is what Mr. Wesley later said: *"I drove Cynthia to Sunday School and went to get gas for my car. Only a few blocks away, I heard an explosion. I knew it was our church. I rushed back but could not find my daughter. Someone told me that I had better go to the hospital.. There they asked me what she was wearing. I told them a little class ring. They pulled out her hand and I saw the ring. Then I saw her black patent leather shoes and her white socks. I said, 'That's her.' I didn't want to see how she looked.....I have not*

asked why it happened to us. I don't feel bitter. I'm hurt and pained because our daughter was plucked from us."

What kind of a wimp would accept such an atrocity and not want to strike back with force?

Call the wimp "Mr. Wesley". Call the wimp "Jesus".

When some racist lunatic bombs a church and snuffs out the lives of little girls attending Sunday School, isn't the proper reaction one of rage and retribution?

This is Jesus' answer: *"No! Rage and payback in the face of violence and hostility will not resolve conflict, it will only fan the flames, like throwing a match on gasoline."*

While there are some who thrive on the unhealthy postures of conflict, tensions, and hostility, most of us really yearn for the resolution of conflict. Most of us hold peace and harmony up as goals after which to strive as human beings.

Consider, for example, the conflicts and tensions in your own life.

Maybe you can think of some past or current conflict with your spouse or partner.

Or...a tension or anger at work.

Or....maybe a strong disagreement that you are having with a child....or a parent.

Think of a conflict in your life**in your heart of hearts, isn't it your wish to somehow ameliorate the conflict and restore some sense of peace and harmony to the situation?** That is what emotionally healthy persons desire, I suggest. They yearn for harmony to reign in place of disharmony....for peace to overcome conflict....for calm to replace chaos.

How are we doing so far? If you can agree with me up to this point, let me add a simple theological dimension to this discussion. In religious jargon, that action which allows for harmony, peace, and calm to reign is **REDEMPTION**. Redemption is the process by which harmony is best restored....by which peace is most wholesomely achieved....between two conflicting parties.

Consider again the story of Mr. Wesley and the tragic death of his daughter, Cynthia. How, in the name of God, out of that singular tragedy, could anyone best move toward reconciliation and redemption? The only way...**THE ONLY WAY**....was for Mr. Wesley to absorb that unconscionable and fateful blow to his cheek and make a decision not to strike back. **NOT STRIKE BACK?.....INDEED, TURN THE OTHER CHEEK.** Incredible!! But, if we are brutally honest with ourselves, **how far does "an eye for an eye" really take us?** Ultimately the higher goal is redemption....not revenge. "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" not yours!!

Redemption is only achieved by one of the parties in the conflict making a move, getting off dead center, and deciding to absorb the blow from the other and not strike back in retribution. It's tough, no question. However, such an act of redemption closes off the supply of oxygen which feeds the fire.

Do we need reminders? This is the way taken by Jesus Christ himself.....a way symbolized by the hard wood of a cross. It is the way taken only by a few courageous souls in every generation who hear Christ's pleadings and follow his example. It is the only answer to the torment and the anguish of the world. But those who are willing to follow this pathway, few though they be, somehow redeem the rest of us....indeed. redeem all humankind.

As we grasp further the impact of today's Gospel, this is what Jesus was teaching when faced with the conflict, hatred and malice of his day. How can it be destroyed? How can situations of hatred and tension that divide people from one another be redeemed? Jesus' answer went right to the jugular; paybacks were counter-productive; they only fueled the conflict. Hatred and tension could only be redeemed by "turning the other cheek".....not as an act of martyrdom, but as an act of faithful and courageous humility.

In closing, let me share a snapshot of our message today from the movie "Ghandi". In one of the closing scenes, a Hindu leader comes to the bedside of Ghandi, pleading with him to end his long fast. Ghandi reaffirms that he will end his fast when the Hindus and++++ Muslims stop fighting. The Hindu, with hatred for the Muslims burning in his eyes, says he will continue fighting. To justify his resolve he tells how Muslims took his little boy and crushed the boy's head. He, in turn, captured a Muslim boy and killed him the same way. Then he added, very sorrowfully, **"I have been living in hell."**

Ghandi reflects on this a moment and then says softly, "I think I know a way out of hell." And with the Hindu hanging on every word, Ghandi tells him, **"Go and find a boy similar to your son the Muslims killed, take him into your own home as your son, and raise him as a Muslim."**