

WGUMC March 2, 2014 Matthew 5:38-48
“Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream”

I have some strange dreams sometimes. In seminary, I dreamt that I was a dairy cow trapped in a washing machine! Fortunately, my dreams don't come true. But some dreams I wish would come true, like the dream shared by young people all over the Arab world, a dream of freedom and democracy that turned into the Arab Spring of a few years ago.

At the time, I remember reading about the struggle for liberation in Tunisia, where it all got started, and I was intrigued to find that the peaceful protesters there were reading a little book written by an American academic, Gene Sharp, called *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, now available in 25 languages. His book is a practical, step-by-step, how-to guide for nonviolent resistance and regime change.

Sharp's tactics have been used in many places: Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The Tunisian youth movement got them from a group in Serbia and shared them with the

Egyptians. And the unimaginable happened: the youth of Tunisia came together, put their lives on the line for freedom, and took down a dictator. Goes to show you that successful nonviolent campaigns for social change did not die with Gandhi and Dr. King.

It worked in Tunisia. Not so well in Egypt, Libya or Syria. The problem is that the people who rushed in to fill the power vacuums in most of those countries haven't read Sharp's book. They don't know that it doesn't matter who's in charge or how many guns they have, because oppressive power is no match for people power. Sharp says that all the people have to do is find and exploit the weakness in their oppressors. Eventually, the tyrants will be undone by their own evil.

Jesus lived in a land ruled by tyrants, and he had his own ideas about nonviolent resistance. You can read all about it in the Sermon on the Mount.

What I'm going to share with you today is what biblical scholar Walter Wink calls Jesus' "Third Way." Most of us think that there are only two options in a crisis situation: fight or flight. Either we resist evil violently or we give into it entirely. Wink argues that there is an alternative, a third way. It's the hard way: the way of Jesus.

Let's start with "Do not resist an evil doer." According to Wink, this isn't a verse about letting the enemy run over you. How could Jesus have said, "Do not resist evil?" when he resisted evil all over the place. Remember he said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!...You snakes, you brood of vipers!" [Matthew 23] Remember when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, crying: "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." [Matthew 21:13]

No, Jesus did not mean that we should give in to evil. What we have here is a poor translation of the Greek word

antistenai. The word was most often used in a military context. So, Jesus is really saying do not resist as an army would resist. Don't try to stop the violence with more violence. You don't want to become the evil you despise.

Now, that's too idealistic for a lot of us. We have an awfully hard time imagining what resisting nonviolently would even look like. So did the people listening to Jesus, so he gives them several concrete, practical examples. First, he says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Sounds like crazy advice in our day. But Wink helps us to understand what it meant in Jesus' day.

Picture this: In order to be struck on the right cheek, you'd have to be hit with either the left fist or the back of the right hand. But in Jesus' day, the left hand was never used for anything except using the latrine. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. So a strike on the right cheek would have been a backhanded slap, probably an attempt to

punish or humiliate, rather than to injure. A backhanded slap was used by someone who had power over someone else: a master hitting a slave, a man hitting a woman, a parent striking a child.

So if the slave or the woman or the child were to turn the other cheek, the left cheek, then their abuser couldn't backhand them. So turning the other cheek was actually saying, "I refuse to be humiliated by you anymore." Now, the master might whip them for defying him, but they have kept their dignity. Without using any violence at all, they have asserted their humanity.

A second example of nonviolent resistance is when Jesus says, "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." We often interpret this to mean that we can never give enough. It's not good enough to give just your coat, you've got to give your cloak, too.

But that's not what this passage is about, either. We have to understand the context and the culture. This example was about someone owing a debt and being sued in court to pay it. Now, in Jesus' day, the debtor had no chance of convincing a judge to rule in his favor. The cards were stacked against him, because he was poor. His coat was the only thing he owned, and he was being sued to give it up as repayment for the loan.

So what does Jesus advise? Give your cloak as well. Considering that no one wore underwear in those days, this meant stripping naked right there in front of the guy who dragged you into court. In ancient Israel, that was a shameful thing, but not for the one who was naked. The shame fell on the one who saw his nakedness.

You can imagine the scene when the poor man leaves the courthouse and walks home without a stitch on. Pretty soon the whole town is talking and the loan shark is made a laughing

stock. I don't suppose he's going to be too anxious to sue in court again.

A third tactic for nonviolent resistance. Jesus says, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." We quote that verse any time we talk about going great lengths to help somebody. Again, that's not what is going on here. Roman law allowed soldiers to force any civilian to carry their heavy gear for them, but they could only force them to carry it one mile. Anything beyond that was a breach of military code. So, when Jesus says, "go the second mile," he isn't telling people to give aid to the enemy or cooperate with the Roman occupation. He is saying: make the soldier break his own rules, and hope he gets into trouble. Here is Jesus saying, the best offense is a good defense. Take the initiative away from your oppressor and you win.

You've probably never heard these verses explained this way. It just reminds us of how far removed we are from the

context in which Jesus was teaching. What does his teaching mean in our context?

Walter Wink concludes his study by pointing out that in the year 1989, there were thirteen nations that underwent non-violent revolutions. We tend to remember the unsuccessful one: China. But all the others—including Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria—were successful. In that year alone, hundreds of millions of people were engaged in non-violent regime change. So, despite what happened in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, let no one say that nonviolence doesn't work anymore. [From *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, 1998.]

It works, but it is hard work. And for a Christian, it doesn't go far enough. So far, we've been talking about tactics. What Jesus really wants is transformation. He wants us to dream about a kingdom that is much bigger than the Roman Empire, bigger than the segregated South, the former Soviet Union,

and the modern-day Middle East. Jesus commands us not only to resist violence non-violently. He also demands that we love the perpetrators of that violence sincerely. That really is the impossible dream, isn't it? Because regime change is a cinch compared to that kind of heart change.

Yet Jesus knows that the only way to finally defeat evil is to love it to death. I don't mean that we can change every bad guy into a good guy just by being nice to them. Jesus isn't as naïve as that. But Jesus knows that by praying for those who persecute us, we defeat the very purpose of their persecution. They want us to hate them, and if we oblige them, then they win. But if we get down on our knees and sincerely ask God to give them what is truly best for them, then their hatred loses its power over us. Their violence can't touch us even if they kill us. Paul says, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your

sting?...Thanks be to God who give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” [I Cor 15:54-55]

Why should we be so gracious to our enemies? Because God was so gracious to us. Paul writes in Romans that God proves God’s love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, we were reconciled to God through Christ. [Romans 5:8-10] So, if we love only those who love us, then we aren’t even close to loving others the way God loves us.

You don’t have to like your enemy. You don’t have to let them run over you. But if you don’t want to be poisoned by their hate, victimized by their violence, then you must love them. If you want the victory through Jesus Christ, then you must pray for them, for their wellbeing, for their transformation, and yes, for their salvation.

I’m well aware that this is an impossible dream and there's no way we can do this on our own. But with God, all things are

possible. Paul says, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me." [Phil 4:13] So, we can be perfect in love, because our God is perfect in love. And we can even love our enemies, because it is really God who is loving them through us.

That's the amazing thing about grace. We don't have to do a thing. Christ has already done it for us, and Christ can do it through us. This is the dream that can become a reality.

As many of you know, Pete Seeger was a big dreamer. He always believed that music could work miracles in this world. He may have died, but one of the songs he used to sing lives on in this dreamer: "Last night I had the strangest dream, I've ever dreamed before. I dreamed the world had all agreed to put an end to war." [Song by Ed McCurdy, recorded in 1950] But it isn't the song; it's the Sermon on the Mount that keeps the dream alive in me.

*Last night I had the strangest dream
I ever dreamed before
I dreamed the world had all agreed
To put an end to war
I dreamed I saw a mighty room
The room was filled with men
And the paper they were signing said
They'd never fight again*

*And when the papers all were signed
And a million copies made
They all joined hands and bowed their heads
And grateful prayers were prayed
And the people in the streets below
Were dancing round and round
And swords and guns and uniforms
Were scattered on the ground*

*Last night I had the strangest dream
I ever dreamed before
I dreamed the world had all agreed
To put an end to war*