

“Turn, Give, Go: Jesus’ Tough Teachings”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Mars Hill Church is a congregation located in Seattle, Washington, and it was a congregation of over 8,000 members and had expanded to 15 sites in 5 different states. The Mars Hill Church was led by a charismatic, young pastor by the name of Mark Driscoll, but on October 14, just a few weeks ago, after a series of missteps, unethical behavior and an investigation by the leadership of his church, Mark Driscoll resigned. His resignation, as you can imagine, has been very difficult for the Mars Hill congregation and, indeed, it has been so difficult that its future is now in question. Mark Driscoll was young and bold, and he spoke from the pulpit in ways that most pastors would never dream of. For all of these reasons, his sermons as bold as his youth, his leadership style was very attractive up until a point, but he went too far. He went too far, not only with his own church members, but he also lashed out at other Christians. He lashed out at other Christians who he felt were turning Jesus into nothing but a nice guy. He was angry that certain Christians were turning Jesus into a gentle, feminine Jesus, a Jesus who couldn't stand his ground.

So, in 2007 in an interview, Driscoll had this to say about Jesus and the Christians who would make him soft. He wrote and said “Some emergent types of Christians want to recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie, in a dress with a lot of products in his hair, who drank decaf. coffee and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes, but in the Book of Revelation, Jesus is a prize fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper-wearing, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up”—strong and inflammatory words, to be sure, but perhaps Driscoll, in that statement, was on to something.

It has long been a concern to church leaders that many men find church and faith hard to buy into. Men in our culture are socialized to be tough, to take care of business, to “git ‘er done” and to do it all with force if necessary. The concern of church leaders is that the Jesus of love and mercy and compassion just doesn't cut it with the modern man and so this possible problem with Jesus is intensified when we read passages like Matthew 5:38-42. These 5 verses are the hardest teachings of Jesus that we have, and the church has historically failed to talk honestly about what these verses really mean, so today I will make a stab at talking honestly about these verses.

As we know, Matthew 5:38-42 has within it 3 primary teachings. The teachings are to “turn the other cheek”, to “give away your cloak”, and to “go a second mile when you have been forced to go the first mile”. Taken together, and understood without any historical context, these passages have been the basis for what Walter Link calls a “systematic training in cowardness”, that these teachings from Jesus have made us weak and Jesus, from this point of view, without any context, is not only a wimp, but has been, for some of us, an embarrassment. He seems to teach that, in the face of evil, roll over, don't fight back, just be a Christian doormat, but we know better and we know, of course, that Jesus wasn't talking about rolling over. He wasn't talking about watching from the sidelines while evil takes its course. He was, in fact, talking about something very different, so, what I want to do is take some time to go through the three primary lessons of this text and sort of play around and think about what he may have been saying to those early followers in that first century in Palestine.

Lesson #1:

Jesus says “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn also the other one”, so immediately we must ask the question: Why was it the right cheek? Why was this right cheek lifted up as important? Well, let’s think about this sort of encounter. A blow by the right fist in that right-handed world Jesus inhabited would land on the left cheek of the opponent. If I was to punch you (which I would never do), my right fist would hit you on your left cheek. Now, to hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand, but in first century Palestine, the left hand was used only for unclean tasks, and this was so strong a social custom about the left hand that use of the left hand carried with it legal consequences and social ostracism, so the only way a person could strike the right cheek was with the back of the hand, and a backhand slap was a way that you would admonish inferiors. So, masters backhanded slaves, parents backhanded children, and Romans backhanded Jews.

The followers of Jesus in that first century were often at the receiving end of the right-handed blow to the left cheek, a blow that was often delivered from Roman soldiers, and others who were in authority over them were instructed by Jesus to turn the other cheek as a way of robbing the oppressor of the power to humiliate them any further, so the person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, after being hit the first time, try it again; your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect, and I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. You cannot demean me. So, turning the other cheek was not about taking a beating, but it was a very shrewd and powerful way to stand your ground and fight back nonviolently as a point of dignity. So, in that first lesson, Jesus is giving a very oppressed and dominated people a true tool for how to preserve their humanity.

Lesson #2:

Jesus says “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well”. In the second lesson, the scene is set in a court of law, and the focus is on a deeply indebted person. Jesus’ followers were not simply poor, poor people, but they were also indebted. They were involved in a system that was vicious, so in this scene someone is being sued for an outer garment, or a coat, and as we saw from the text in Exodus that Susie read, it was only the poorest of the poor who would have nothing of their clothing to give in collateral for a loan, so think about our homeless brothers and sisters on the corners in Greensboro. What they have is the clothing on their backs. Jewish law, in Jesus’ time, strictly required that a coat taken in pawn for a loan had to be returned in the evening at sunset so that that poor person would not freeze to death.

Now, think about that on a 30-year loan, going back twice a day for this coat, so with the threat of freezing to death looming in the background of this teaching, why would Jesus counsel his followers, the poor, to give over their undergarments as well? They have just lost their coats. Now he’s saying to give up your long underwear.

We must remember that this is a scene in a courtroom, and to give over one’s coat and undergarment would mean to stand there in the courtroom buck naked, to stand there in front of the judge with absolutely nothing but your birthday suit on, and then to go out from that courtroom into the community with nothing on, and at this moment, the poor man who stands there naked has, thus, transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has registered a stunning protest against the system of debt and he has said in effect: Here, you want My coat? You want My cloak underneath? You want My hat? You want My gloves? Have it all. Next you’re going to want My body, but Jesus, in that way, is saying that you will not take My life, you will not take My dignity, but all the other stuff you can have because this system stinks, and it’s killing me but you will not get the last word.

Further in this idea around nakedness is that nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and the shame of nakedness fell, not on the naked person but on the one causing the nakedness, so Jesus’

teaching here is about revealing the unjust nature of the debt system while allowing the poor once again to preserve their dignity. This is not a teaching about being generous.

Lesson #3:

Jesus says “and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile”. Context: “if anyone forces you”...Who is Jesus talking about? Who is this “anyone” person? The in and out of it, of course, is a direct reference to the Roman troops who occupied Palestine in Jesus’ time. These were the folks who could force other people to do things, and these Roman troops were legally allowed to force citizens to carry their packs for at least one mile. This one mile was actually the maximum that they could compel someone to carry their pack. It was a Roman compromise because this forced labor was a cause of bigger resentment for all of those people who were living under Roman occupation. They hated this. It was creating a tinderbox situation of resentment and anger. These packs were between 40 and 60 pounds, and to have poor people carry these packs was something they just couldn’t stand.

Now, what is important to this teaching is that Roman soldiers who violated this one mile rule were subject to military discipline to the loss of their rank or, even in severe cases, to imprisonment. This had become such a dilemma to the Romans, such a touchy subject that they had to set up some rules, so then you must imagine there was this one mile limit. Imagine the soldier, imagine the surprise, perhaps even the panic that the soldier felt when this poor civilian Jew, this follower of Jesus, gets to mile marker #2 and says “I’ll carry it for you another mile” and then starts to carry it. The poor, powerless local citizen who has been forced into the role of pack mule for the soldiers who oppressed him, once again claims the upper hand. It is an act which reveals the absurdity and injustice of the Roman Empire and its occupation forces.

So, the vision that Jesus is lifting up here is about dignity. It is not about being walked over. It is not about giving in. It is about being shrewd and defending our humanity, so in a world which offers only 2 options when we are faced with overt threats (Those options are, of course, fight or flight.), Jesus is pointing here to a third way. It is a courageous and created engagement with those who do us harm.

In the struggles in our world and our lives, we are not to roll over. This is not the instruction of Jesus. We are not to give in or watch meekly while we are used or abused or anyone else is used or abused because Jesus was powerful. He was not a wallflower, but neither was Jesus a man of violence. His teachings revealed the reign of God as it breaks into the world. Even in the most unlikely of circumstances, Jesus is making God’s reign come to fruition. It comes not as an imposition from on high but as a leaven right in the midst of the world’s problems--a leaven that slowly causes the dough to rise, slowly reveals the systemic problems that disrupt our communities, that slowly points to a new way of living and organizing our world because Jesus was not a wimp. Jesus was not soft on evil, and He did not counsel His followers in any way to turn their backs on the wrongs of this world, but Jesus calls us instead to be directly engaged in the problems and the injustices of our world so that God’s kingdom can take root right here and now and we can be part of His building party. Jesus’ teaching to us in 2014 is a bold, difficult teaching. It is about creativity, it is about living courageously, and it is about following the God of peace in a world that is bent on violence and evil, so we must struggle as God’s people, as followers of the Christ, to bring peace to this world, to reach out to those who suffer under enormous pains and to not, in the process of doing all that, become the evil that we hate. We give thanks to God for his teachings, for Jesus’ wisdom and Jesus’ prophetic teaching that God is at work right here and right now. Thanks be to God. Amen.