

## It's Kind of Like Aikido [Text - Matthew 5:38-48]

Pastor Dave Shackle  
February 23, 2014

In the late 1920's, Japanese martial arts teacher Morihei Ueshiba developed an intriguing new method for training his students, so that they could defend themselves while also protecting their attacker from injury. Ueshiba's motivation for doing this, arose from his Buddhist background and his personal philosophy of universal peace and harmony. His system became to be known as *Aikido*, which is translated as "the Way of Unifying Life Energy". Aikido is performed by working *with* the motion of the attacker, and redirecting the force of the attack, rather than opposing it head-on. When done correctly, it requires a minimum amount of the defender's energy, while expending a great deal of the attacker's - thereby frustrating and wearing-down the aggressor, while the one being assaulted remains relatively calm, centered, and in control. It is not unlike Jesus' approach to non-violent resistance.

In reflecting on Jesus' saying, "Do not resist an evil doer," I was reminded of others, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who applied this same approach in their own work for justice, equality, and human rights. Even though all three individuals are highly regarded as people of *peace*, they were far from *passive*, dedicating much of their lifework to actively resisting oppression and violence. And even though Jesus didn't resist those who arrested him and lead him to his death, it's important to remember that it was his deliberate choice to follow that path, and that he was definitely not a dormant doormat! In fact, if we look at his statements like "turn the other cheek" in their historic context, we see that Jesus is actually teaching us how to resist evil on *our* terms, rather than letting our adversary's willingness to use force or violence turn us into violent people.

One thing History consistently teaches us, is that responding to violence with more violence simply creates an escalating cycle of violence. Jesus demonstrates that the way to break that cycle, is to

respond in a manner that deflects the impact of the attack back onto the aggressor, and lets that person know that we will not allow them to dictate how we will interact with them. [It's kind of like Aikido.] And as followers of our sensei [or *teacher*] Jesus Christ, we will not resort to "an eye for an eye!" Instead, we will open our eyes to creative and clever ways to defy those who seek to treat us or other in harmful or shameful ways.

In this morning's reading, Jesus gives his followers three examples of how to stand up to those who try to forcefully control them or provoke them, yet without responding with aggressive force themselves. The first is, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also." Back in Jesus day, the left hand was considered - well *gauche* - unfit for routine use. You weren't even supposed to gesture with your left hand in public speaking. Therefore the only way someone would hit you on the right cheek, would be with the back of his right hand. Of course the back of the hand isn't used if you really want to hurt someone. It's intended as a stinging insult, as a way to put you in your place. That was the kind of blow that often came from someone in a position of power or authority: a master to a slave, a husband to a wife, a Roman citizen to a common Jew. Jesus says, "If someone tries to humiliate you and put you in your place as an inferior, don't cower or retreat or strike back; instead, stand firm and *turn the other cheek.*"

By turning the other cheek, you are letting that bully know, "I will not be intimidated, or humiliated, by you! I am a person, with dignity and self-respect. I am a child of God! And nothing you can do to me will ever change that fact!" So even though that other person may be in a position of authority, that doesn't mean that he [or she] has the power to break your spirit, or dominate your soul.

The second illustration of creative resistance that Jesus gives is, "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." According to Deuteronomy Chapter 24, a poor person could use his coat [or outer garment] as a pledge to secure a loan. And even though the law implied that the creditor shouldn't try to harass or embarrass the debtor, the creditor did have the right to take that coat every

morning, as long as he returned it every night. Technically, it *was* his to hold for the day; but practically, it served no purpose to do so except to publically humiliate the person in debt.

Many of the people Jesus is talking to would know what it's like to be dragged into court for being in debt, or to have their coat taken away on a daily basis by some bullying creditor. [And you and I think those harassing bill-payment *phone* calls are bad!] So Jesus tells them, "Look, even though the Law won't stop this mean-spirited, money-hungry person from harassing you, there is something you can do to turn the tables. I know this may sound a bit extreme, and maybe a little crazy; but when your creditor sues and takes your coat, *give him your cloak as well!*"

What that *meant*, was handing over your outer garment, and *then* handing over the only piece of clothing you had left - leaving you standing there completely naked! Just picture that debtor leaving the court stark naked and strolling back home. [You don't have to picture it that vividly!] And Imagine everyone in town coming into the street to see him, and saying, "What in the world happened to you?" "Well, Levi the Loan Shark took me to court, and got all my clothes!" "Levi did that? Well he should be ashamed of himself! Just because he's got money to lend doesn't give him the right to be such a greedy jerk! Where is that no-good, low-life scum-bag? We'll show him what public humiliation really is!"

And suddenly, the tables have been turned; the power has shifted. And you can bet the shirt off your back [if you had one], that it's going to be a long time before *any* creditor in that town takes someone else to court to try to harass or embarrass them. For even though wealthy people - especially today - have tremendous resources and power at their disposal, it doesn't mean that they can't be powerfully challenged - even by the poorest of the poor, who stand up and stand together!

The third example Jesus gives is, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” In those days, the people who could force you to go one mile were Roman soldiers. Anyone living in occupied territory who wasn’t a Roman citizen, could by Roman law, be forced to carry a soldier’s backpack one mile, but no farther. And there were mile markers on all Roman roads. So if a civilian was forced to carry the pack *more* than one mile, that soldier could find himself in deep trouble with his commanding officer. Jesus is saying, “If a soldier forces you to carry his pack, simply cooperate [you really have little choice]. But when you come to the mile marker, *keep-on going!*”

Suddenly, that soldier doesn’t know what to do. He thinks, “What’s going on here? Usually a person drops that pack like a hot matzah ball, right at the mile marker, but this guy is still going! I could get into some serious trouble if my commander sees this.”

“O.K., that’s far enough, you can put down the pack.... Really, you don’t have to do this.... Thank’s for your help, but *please*, let me take it from here!” And before you know it, that mighty Roman soldier is imploring that humble Jew to give him back his backpack!

In these three examples, that on the surface may look like a call to meekly cower before the rich and powerful, Jesus is really encouraging his followers to take the power away from the aggressor, and put the pressure back onto the oppressor. Of course Jesus’ way may result in some sore cheeks from being slapped, some red cheeks [on a *couple* of levels] from walking naked through town, and some sore muscles from going that extra distance. But some soreness and humiliation would have happened anyway. However, when you and I go that extra mile, and show the strength and resolve to resist oppressive bullying and evil intentions, without becoming evil bullies ourselves, we are letting the aggressors know that they don’t have all the power. In fact, our non-violent resistance makes a stronger, more effective, and longer lasting impact, than any act of hostile revenge will ever make.

As Mahatma Gandhi observed, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Confronting violence with more violence, simply leads to an escalating spiral of violence that does not end. This is why Jesus passionately encourages us to find different and better and more creative ways to resist evil and oppression.

Ways that catch our adversaries off balance, and use their negative energy to our positive advantage;

Ways that let them know that we refuse be victims, yet we will not resort to violence;

Ways that may even make them respect us, to a certain degree;

Ways that, hopefully, will stop the cycle of violence, and begin a *new* cycle of compassion and fairness, genuine justice and everlasting peace.