

Turn the Cheek, Turn the Tables
Sunday, September 3, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mark Chase

Well good morning friends, it is so good to be back. And it is so good to be with you on this labor day weekend....it is cloudy, a little rainy, and many of us have the day off tomorrow and you are still here in church, look at your neighbor and say “neighbor, you’ve got nothing left to prove...” If you don’t attend another service all year lol....You made it to this one. Please come to all the other services this year....

The place, was South Africa, the specific city and region is unknown, but the time was during the height of South African Apartheid, a brutal system of racist , and white supremacist oppression, that violently stripped Black South Africans of their rights and dignity on a daily basis. It is in that context that one day, we find the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu walking down the sidewalk. And as he’s walking to his destination, a white man begins to walk towards Bishop Tutu, on the same sidewalk. It just so happens that the sidewalk also begins to narrow, placing Tutu and this white man at a physical impasse. And finally, As they reach one another face to face, the white man stops in his tracks blocking the sidewalk, refusing to move, not even an inch, He then states, with all racist vitriol and venom “I don’t make space, for gorillas...” And to that Archbishop Desmond Tutu stepped aside making room for the man to pass and said “ah yes, But I do....” Beloved, Bishop Tutu in that one moment, embodies brilliantly what Jesus was inviting his followers into then, and what Jesus is inviting us as his followers into now, and that is the invitation, in the face of oppression, to indeed turn the cheek, but in so doing, ultimately....TURN THE TABLES!!! Look at your neighbor and say “neighbor, when you turn the cheek, you can turn the tables.”

That’s what Jesus is inviting his audience, and this audience into, is a strategy of resistance that turns the table on the oppressor, exposing their evil for exactly what it is. Contrary to popular belief, This parable is not Jesus passing out, a prescription for passivity. This is not Jesus, telling his followers to, go along to get along. This is not Jesus urging his community, and this community, to accept the status quo, this is the revolutionary Jesus, giving us wisdom for how to engage in a revolutionary resistance! Turn the cheek, and turn the tables!

And more specifically than turning the other cheek, Jesus says, if you’re struck on your right, offer them your left... What’s happening here....? This is oddly specific...Is Jesus saying hey, they hit you once, make sure they get your good side....probably not, many biblical scholars point out that if you were struck on the right cheek, it meant one of two things, either someone had struck you with their left hand, or you were struck backhanded by someone’s right hand...and the reason someone would strike you back-handed with their right hand, was because the left hand, sorry to all the lefties in the room, was thought by many cultures of Jesus’s time, to be un-clean, and people went through great lengths not to use it...so offering the left cheek, put the bully in a dilemma...”Do I strike them open handed with my clean hand, and dirty it all up, or do I back hand them, but with my left hand, which is all dirty, and will make me feel all dirty,

if I use it all.....???" Jesus's directive puts oppression in a bind, and it gives dignity BACK, to the oppressed, as Yale Professor and biblical scholar Dr. Obery Hendricks notes in his landmark work *The Politics of Jesus* "Masters backhanded slaves, Romans backhanded Jews, husbands backhanded wives, parents backhanded children. the only prudent way those who were struck in this manner could respond was to acknowledge their inferior status with a head hung in shame, and silent humiliation. But, by taking an action, the powerless and the oppressed became more than victims; they became actors who asserted their humanity, their somebodyness. By turning the other cheek they took back their dignity and refused to be defined by those in power." Jesus was handing out a blueprint for Non-Violence, not a hall pass for non-involvement....ahhhhh imma say that one more time i know, i been on vacation, so i got some stuff pent up...Jesus, was handing out a blueprint for Non-Violence, not a hall pass for non-involvement. As a matter of fact as Gene Sharp, one of the leading minds of non-violent struggle anywhere in the world notes in his book 'How Non-Violent struggle works he says "As a technique, nonviolent action is not passive. It is NOT in-action. It is action! It is simply action that is non-violent." That's what Jesus, is inviting us into, "Find a new neighbor and say neighbor, Turn the cheek, turn the tables!"

But beloved if I'm honest, as a Black Man in America, married to a Black Woman, raising two Black Sons, with the hatred of an America that was never designed for us, constantly exerting its weight and force upon on us, turning the other cheek, ain't always the first impulse I turn to, when I turn on the news and see Ta'kiyah Young, a pregnant 21 year old black woman shot to death by police outside of a grocery store... Turn the other cheek, isn't the first thing that comes to mind, when I think of Angela Michelle Carr, 52; Jerrald Gallion, 29; and Anolt Joseph "AJ" Laguerre Jr., 19, murdered inside a Dollar General by a white supremacist, turn the other cheek, ain't the first scripture or the first impulse, that comes to mind...

And I would argue that it's not the first impulse, that any of us, probably turn to, when our communities are the targets of physical violence, and systemic oppression...and I would argue, that the heart of beloved community, expands and expands and expands, so that one community, indeed is OUR community, and what they do to one of us, they also do to all of us!....but it's difficult, being targeted, by the worst in others, can sometimes tempt a response, from the worst in us...

but beloved, even as I say all of that, I want to make careful note, that this passage isn't rushing us towards forgiveness, , indeed, the forgiveness of marginalized people, especially black people, has been exploited for generations in this country, but I don't believe this passage is pushing us towards forgiveness, but this passage is pushing us towards agency....and pushing us, towards strategy....

When you turn the other cheek, you change the field of play, on the oppressor. You change the field of play, from something they are strong and well versed at i.e., abuse, violence, physical intimidation, hatred, and brutality, to a playing field that leaves them bewildered, like a fish out of water.....It's like this....

Ya'll, I'm supremely confident, that I could thoroughly whoop Michael Jordan in his physical prime... one on one.... in a spelling bee...and that has less to do with Michael Jordan, and more to do with myself, I was an English Major, and I feel fairly confident in my ability to spell, especially with Microsoft Word right in front of me...Ya'll, I'd be eager, to take on Klayton Kershaw, just me and him, one on one, in a game of... wordle....and ya'll, with microphones in hand, on any stage in the world, under the brightest of lights, I'm confident I'd get the best of Adele...just as long as I was allowed to rap, and she wasn't allowed to sing...I think y'all get the point. You can't go at your oppressor, where your oppressor is strong, but turning the cheek, allows you to change the playing field...to where your oppressor is weak, and where you are strong, and as followers of Jesus, we are called to be stronger in love, than we are, in hate, stronger in wisdom, than we are in weaponry, stronger in compassion, than we are in combat, stronger in peace, than we are in punishment, stronger in solidarity, than we are in supremacy, stronger in healing, than we are in harming, stronger in justice, than we are in judgment, turning the other cheek, flips the field of play, to where we are strong, and the enemy is weak...

... and when you turn the cheek, it allows you to resist oppression, while simultaneously not becoming your oppressor....

Right after this, this portion of the sermon on the mount...Jesus admonishes us to love our enemies,

and I can't help but wonder, if maybe the first step in LOVING our enemies, is loving ourselves enough to not become JUST LIKE, OUR ENEMIES!!

Turn the other cheek, carry the pack two miles, give them your cloak as well, these are all acts of resistance, that reject the invitation to adopt the nature of the one being resisted!

All Hell, could be breaking loose around you, but that doesn't have to mean that All Hell, is taking root WITHIN YOU.

This past Friday I had the honor, of being invited to stand in solidarity on the picket lines with Local 11 right here in Pasadena, as they withhold their labor, in order to get the liveable wages from the Pasadena Hilton that their labor deserves...and you know, The Hilton Hotel Chain is worth 15 Billion dollars, and according to the L.A. Times, The Hilton Hotel CEO, Chris Nassetta, in 2020, doubled his compensation package to 55.9 Million dollars, up from 22 million in 2019. Yes, that was during the pandemic...so the wage gap between the Hilton CEO, and the local 11 workers who are striking, is cataclysmic, and it is nothing but pure unadulterated evil and greed, but you know what we heard, as we marched, and marched, drums, laughter, encouragement, hope, and Joy, you see right here in Pasadena, Local 11 is resisting the empire, while not adopting the nature, of the empire...

I saw the same thing, in George Floyd Square, in Minneapolis, in 2021, the cornerstone of that

moment, wasn't the brutality that murdered George Floyd, it was joy, hope, love, justice and peace....

You see Jesus knew, the same thing that Audrey Lorde knew and so famously stated, that the Master's tools, can never dismantle the master's house, and even if they could, the master's tools, certainly can't build a better future than the present we have right now....

As Adrienne Marie Brown notes in her seminal work 'Emergent Strategy she says "We must make just, and liberated futures, irresistible." And you don't make the future irresistible, with the same techniques and tools that make the present something that needs to be resisted.

Beloved I'm so glad, that we have a revolutionary Jesus, who gave us, some revolutionary wisdom, I'm so glad, that we have a visionary Jesus, who had eyes to see, that an eye for an eye, just leaves everybody blind, I'm so glad, we have a Jesus, whose Kingdom, is not of this world, whose compensation package, was simply his steadfast love, for humanity, who never needed the title of C.E.O. but if he did, it would stand for compassion, empathy, and obedience to God's will, I'm so glad, we have a savior, who walked down his own sidewalks of oppression, and whose mercy made space for the worst in us, and whose faith still called out the best in us, I'm so glad, we have a Jesus, who doesn't desire for us to just turn the cheek, but whose ultimate desire is that we would discover our power, and turn the tables.

Amen.