

“Charles Atlas & the Gospel”
Luke 6:27-36
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If you remember reading comic books as a kid, you probably remember those ads for the Charles Atlas Bodybuilding system. I remember that in *every one* I read, there was that little four-part comic within the comic about the scrawny little guy getting sand kicked in his face by the musclebound bully. Being a scrawny little guy myself, I could relate to the poor fellow. Finally, the scrawny guy gets wise, calls up Charles Atlas, comes back to the beach even more musclebound than the bully, and faces him down. He gets the girl. End of story. You figure it out. If you want to be a winner in life, you become bigger and stronger than the bullies in your life. That’s how you get ahead. You beat the bully at his own game.

This approach may work pretty well in the comic book world in which we live, but it is an approach that is just the opposite of what Jesus had in mind in our passage from Matthew. As we’ve discovered during our last few weeks of looking at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us our fair share of challenges: to be salt and light, to take aim at the way God has laid out for us to live. Not easy stuff, to be sure, but relative tame compared to the very challenging, sometimes even life threatening words he offers us tonight. “Love your enemies, and pray for

those who persecute you.” What? Do what, Jesus? Love whom? What are you, some kind of a nut?

Until I was in the fifth grade, I went to a private school. However, in that fateful fifth grade year, I transferred to the public school system and I can assure this was not at all a pleasant experience. When you come from a private school, are a little on the small and scrawny side, and have a girl’s name like Stacey, your life is a natural disaster. Where I grew up, the public school system assumed that you had gone to private school for a reason, so they tended to put kids like me straight into the class full of behavioral problems and malcontents. I had a lot of enemies, immediately. On the playground, I had a lot of evildoers to contend with. I had a lot of curses and taunting to endure. And I had a lot of violence to put up with in the form of spitballs and pencil jabs and kidney punches.

And did I call up Charles Atlas, bulk up, and face down my enemies? Well, it was tempting, although I’m not sure even that would have helped. Instead, I did nothing but run away and endure. And do you know why? Probably because I diligently went to Sunday School and had drilled into my head that brilliant wisdom Jesus offered his disciples, to “Turn the other cheek!” How many times have we heard *this* one? Turn the other cheek? We’ve heard over and over again that Jesus seems to be saying, “Be passive. Be nonviolent. Anger is bad. Don’t hit back. Christians shouldn’t hurt or confront people. Don’t resist.” This is precisely what oppressed peoples are always told: “You’ll receive your reward in Heaven for the

indignities of this life. But in the meantime, turn the other cheek while I beat you and then get back to work.” Regarding turning the other cheek, I believe we’ve been misled.

Listen carefully once again to Jesus’ words: Turn the other cheek, Jesus says. Offer your cloak in addition to your coat. Give to those who ask from you. Lend without expecting repayment. Be perfect. You’ll notice that in *each* of these statements, Jesus commands us to do something in response, not just stand there and take it. There *is* an imperative here to take action, although in a different way than the Charles Atlas bodybuilding system.

An ethicist by the name of Glen Stassen has written a great book entitled “Just Peacemaking,” and he uses as one of his Biblical touchstones the text before us tonight, because it has a strong message for we who would be peacemakers in a turbulent world. Stassen has investigated the concept of turning the other cheek and found that what Jesus meant here was that an insulted person, a person struck down as an inferior, should turn to the aggressor the other cheek **also** so as to confront the attacker with his inhuman behavior. It works like this.

Imagine if you were slapped or beaten by someone because he or she thought they had right to do so based on your worthlessness. You’d have three options: you could get beat up and run away, like I did in grade school. You could fight your attacker, bringing you down to his demeaning level. Or you could confront your attacker with their insult and turn it around on them. Turning the other

cheek, as Jesus taught, meant standing up for yourself as a full human being and asserting your dignity. By turning the other cheek towards the attacker, the person who insulted you and considered you a worthless inferior, you were making a bold and active move. You were saying, “I’m not going to take this insult and run away. If you think I’m so inferior, you may have to slap me again, but I’m not going to back down and prove it for you.”

If you did this, if you actually offered your attacker your other cheek, the attacker would have two choices: to either slap you again on the other cheek, recognizing your dignity, or back down and also tacitly acknowledge you as an equal. Either way, by taking this active initiative you affirmed your status as a person of equal human standing. Stassen calls turning the other cheek a “transforming initiative,” for it breaks the cycle of aggression and passivity and transforms the moment, giving it possibilities for change.

The second of Jesus’ imperatives is also a transforming initiative. In Jesus’ time, the things to wear were the tunic, translated as coat here in Matthew and the cloak. The tunic was a knee length, almost dress-like garment that was worn next to the skin by both men and women. The cloak was an outer garment worn on top of the tunic, probably as protection from the sun or other elements. This cloak was a very necessary and valuable garment, especially for the poor or those without houses for one reason or another, like shepherds. This garment was so important that there are specific sections of the Jewish law designed to safeguard

a wearer's possession of his or her cloak. In Exodus 22, we read, "If you take your neighbor's garment in default, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate."

What this is referring to is the seizing of a garment as payment for an unpaid loan. Sort of like ancient near eastern foreclosure. It is this very same immoral act of taking a person's last protection from the cold wind that the Old Testament prophet Amos cried out against eight centuries before Jesus brings it up again. Amos condemns the people of Israel saying, "they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge." In Amos' time, this foreclosure of cloaks had a double indignity to which I think Jesus is referring. Seizing a cloak not only deprives a person of their garment, but it thumbs the creditor's nose at God by violating a law set down by God to protect the defenseless.

So Jesus says to the people, when someone comes to seize your cloak, turn it around on them. Say to them, "You want my cloak? Here, take my tunic too, and see in what condition you leave me. See what a violator of the law you are!" The debtor's condition is quite apparent: He or she is naked! Keep in mind that this transaction, this fashion foreclosure if you will, generally took place in the law court so that the debtor's nakedness would serve as an indictment of the creditor's sin and violation of the law in front of the entire community. Jesus tells the disciples of a nonviolent yet non-passive way to reclaim the dignity which is

inherent in every single human being. He teaches them how to take a transforming initiative.

This is all well and good for two thousand year-old, tunic wearing middle easterners, but how often do we get slapped around or have our cloak demanded of us? How many opportunities do we really have to take these transforming initiatives. I would suggest that we encounter situations all the time which call for us to do as Jesus tells us. It may not be that we ourselves are the victims and survivors of aggression, but inhumanity is never too far away, and if we take seriously Jesus' commandment to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves," we are also obligated to take transforming initiatives on behalf of others.

Several years ago, on Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, I tuned into a memorable TV movie called *The Vernon Johns Story*. It was about the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, just before Dr. King assumed the pulpit there. In the movie, James Earl Jones plays Pastor Vernon Johns who is trying to get his middle class parishioners who are too-dignified-to-sing-Negro-Spirituals to become active in the fight against segregation. After many sizzling sermons and confrontational committee meetings, he finally he gets through to one of the Deacons, Deacon Hill, with the story of Moses killing the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew slave. A small, but meaningful, victory. A little later in the story, the same Deacon Hill comes upon a typical sight in those times: two white police officers beating a black man senseless. And surrounding

the scene, like so many deer caught in the glare of headlights on a dark Alabama highway, a crowd of people stands by transfixed by the barbarity openly displayed in front of them. Deacon Hill is transfixed too, but by the crowd watching the beating doing nothing. He looks to his left and he sees a black face gawking, the fear making his eyes bulge out like in a B-grade horror movie. He looks to his right and sees a woman, motionless except for the tear gently rolling down her cheek. But something distracts Deacon Hill, something besides the moaning of the beaten man and the deafening silence of the crowd, something that breaks the racist spell of the moment. He remembers Vernon Johns telling him of the story of Moses and the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew slave. Finally, he pushes through the small cloud of witnesses and takes two, giant steps towards the officers. Waving his powerful arms over his head, he cries out for the beating to stop. One of the officers does stop the beating but he turns his attention to Deacon Hill and moves to intercept him, shoving him back with his nightstick. Deacon Hill doesn't touch the officer, but the officer begins to beat Deacon Hill anyway and finally moves behind Hill and begins choking him with the nightstick. Hill uses his strength, his only weapon, and flips the officer onto the ground, grabs the hated nightstick and raises it to strike the officer who is now lying on the ground at his feet. He is poised to break the man's skull with the very weapon used upon his own body. But he doesn't do it. He gets shot first by the other officer.

Now you may be wondering why I would use this example to illustrate my point. After all, Hill was about to beat the officer. This is true. But let us not forget that Deacon Hill's *first* action, his *first* inclination, was to stand up for the oppressed and confront the attacker with the horrendousness of his act. Deacon Hill made a transforming initiative. He died for it too. Presumably, this part of the story was included to illustrate just how hard is the way of non-violence and where the civil rights movement went from there, that is, towards full nonviolence. Deacon Hill died too early to feel the influence of Dr. King. But his initial action was nonviolent, yet non-passive and dignifying, yet confrontational.

If that story seems a little removed from your own experience, let me share with you a commercial I saw once that really captures the idea of taking a transforming initiative. The setting is your typical office. The male boss comes over to a woman in his employ and starts in with the routine about how if she used her "natural assets" she could really get ahead in this business, blah, blah, blah. During this harassment, there's this trick photography that makes the woman shrink again and again until she's about half her size. He tells her how attractive she is and that "You should try to be a little more sexy. After all, we're talking about your job!" And here the woman makes her transforming initiative. She says, "No! we're talking about sexual harassment and I don't have to take it." She didn't knee him between the legs. She didn't give in. She didn't run straight to her lawyer and initiate a lawsuit, although that might indeed be considered a

transforming initiative. What she did do, however, was confront her harasser with his humiliating behavior and assert the kind of dignity of which Jesus spoke.

Jesus knew what he was talking about. He knew about the risks involved and the potential for pain and suffering. He knew that people die asserting their dignity and standing up for the rights of others. But he also knew that unless we take transforming initiatives, we can never live into the rest of his teaching: love your enemies. Friends, who, by coming to blows with their attacker, ever loved them to back to life? Who, by returning verbal humiliation with the same, ever was able to call another “friend?” And who, by allowing the rights of others to be sacrificed at altars of hatred ever was able to soothe their suffering.

As he often did, Jesus put a twist on things. This time he shows us that transforming initiatives are not taken just to establish our own dignity or humanity, but also to show our love for the other, indeed to show God’s love for all God’s children. It is precisely in confronting our oppressors with their own inhumanity that we express our love for them. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says, and I would interpret that as, “love them enough to make them human even in the face of their treatment of you.” Loving our enemies may seem incomprehensible to us. But we may begin to sort it out by remembering that in life, as well as in death, Jesus took the ultimate transforming initiative. Jesus’ transforming initiatives make ours possible. Amen.