

## Faith in the real world: the rubber meets the road

Pastor Hubert Den Draak at Pinegrove United church, February 19.

Scripture passage: Matthew 5:38:48 (turning the other cheek)



I have a terrible sense of direction. I used to joke that my sense of direction is so bad, I even get lost in my own back yard – until we moved to a 320-acre property in Nolulu, and I *really* can get lost in my own back yard. My sense of direction, or rather the complete lack of it, is the stuff of legends in my family.

Maybe that's why as a kid, I was just fascinated by anything that would help me

find my way: I had a small collection of compasses, from tiny toy ones to explorer grade ones. I was also the first kid in my grade who always knew where to find the North Star. I knew how to use moss growth on the trunk of a tree to tell North from South; and I knew how to use a watch as a compass (still do!).

I guess knowing those things made me feel in control. Until I found out that you could still get lost, even if you know where to go. Sure, my compass might happily direct me where to go, but I hadn't realized that there's always all kinds of roadblocks in the way. Rivers, buildings, highways, scary dogs... Knowing *where* to go wasn't the hard part. It was figuring out *how* to get there that still made me lose my way.

You could say that today's scripture passages are about setting up a "spiritual sense of direction" for the people of faith. A "compass for Christians". And just as I found out as a kid, when we read these passages we are reminded that there are no simple, instant solutions to the dilemmas of life. It's not so hard to figure out where God wants us to go; the much tougher part is actually doing it in the real world.

Today's passage from Matthew is the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus is telling his followers, okay, you now know my teachings. And this is how they work in the real world.

It is important to remember that he is not telling his followers these things because they are easy, but because they are both difficult *and* vitally important. There is very little here that is only "theoretical" or "theological"; it's all very down to earth. This is where the rubber meets the road, where our faith meets the real world. And it ain't easy...

Jesus starts off by challenging the scripture-based popular wisdom that says, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." A few weeks ago President Trump declared that this

was one of his favourite Bible passages. “If you hit me, I’ll hit you back.” But that’s not what it’s about, it’s not about tit-for-tat or revenge.

“An eye for an eye” was meant to *limit* punishment. The punishment should be in proportion to the crime. In other words, your tongue should not be cut for telling a lie! And you should not be hanged for stealing a loaf. But even then, “an eye for an eye” is still about punishment and determent. Or as Mahatma Gandhi put it: “An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind”.



So it’s not about revenge – but it’s not about becoming a doormat to any abusive brute who comes along, either. What Jesus does here is he moves the whole discussion from the level of crime & punishment (“an eye for an eye”) to the level of love & grace. And he proposes we do that by going above and beyond what the world expects. Jesus says, when we deal with each other, especially when there is conflict, don’t do it in terms of justice or punishment, but in terms of love and grace. Let me explain.

When Jesus says, “If someone ...” his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that “someone” was. The behaviours Jesus describes - slapping the face, suing, forcing to go a mile - were not the kind of things just anyone could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do – and did – to the crowds who were listening to Jesus that day: the poor, the suffering, the oppressed. And who were the privileged in those days? The Roman occupying forces and those who collaborated with them, mostly the very rich and the elite.

“Slapping the right cheek” was a common way of how masters would dress down a servant or slave. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek. This was usually done in front of the other slaves or in public for everyone to see, making it a public humiliation. It was all about asserting status and power over the other. So “slapping the cheek” is not about violence, or about someone hurting you. It’s a symbolic action to state who is in control and has power – and who has not.

The way it always went was like this: the slave must obediently and passively stand facing you. You must strike only the right cheek, and only with the back of the right hand. The left hand striking the left cheek was unthinkable because anything left was considered unclean.

Now imagine your master has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It *appears* that you are

becoming twice as obedient; accepting your master's authority over you not once, but twice. Except... turning your head means your master cannot strike your left cheek *with the back of his right hand*. He's left powerless, and can only walk away.

*[this is where we did a little demonstration]*

The other examples Jesus gives are variations on the same theme.

“Going the extra mile”: There was a law in the time of Jesus that said a Roman soldier could force anyone to carry his heavy backpack for a mile – but no more than a mile, or the soldier could be charged with abuse of power. So when Jesus is telling people to carry that pack voluntarily a second mile, he is turning the table on the soldier, who is now left to explain this situation.

Then there's this part about getting sued. The thing here is: peasants did not sue one another. Even if they could afford it, they simply didn't have the right to do it. Only rich landowners could sue others. Since peasants quite literally only owned the clothes on their backs, being sued for your coat was being sued for the only thing you owned. So why not publicly expose the shame which allows someone with wealth and privilege to take away the only thing a poor person owns by giving him the rest of your clothes and by doing so... going naked! Give your master your last pieces of clothing and let *him* explain to the other townspeople why you are naked. You can imagine the public embarrassment.

When these stories of Jesus were being written down and shared, Christian communities were oppressed and life was not easy. So the things Jesus is talking about in this passage would have been the stuff of every-day life. The people who heard these stories knew what it meant to be persecuted for belonging to the Christian community. They would have asked themselves: “What should we do when we encounter resistance and hostility from others around us? Should we fight back? Or should we let them walk over us?” Christ offers a third way: LOVE them, he says. Ultimately, love will prevail.

All very well and nice, but what does this love look like in real life?

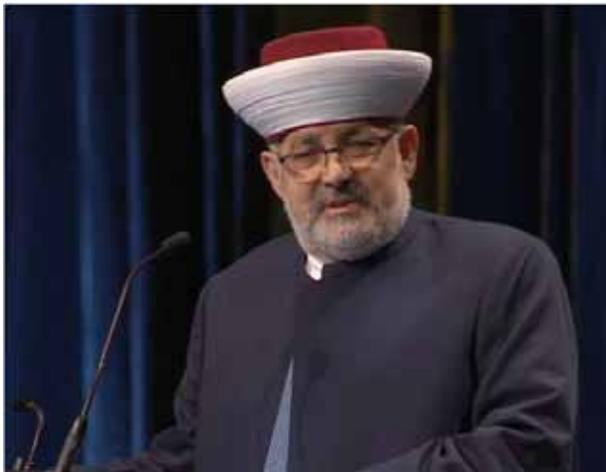
The Rev Martin Luther King, Jr. was a leader in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. He and his fellow marchers were beat up by the police, set upon by dogs, thrown in jail, their church was bombed, and they were blasted with fire-hoses among other things. And yet, Martin Luther King Jr. was able to say: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only *love* can do that”.

He and his followers chose to not retaliate or use violence. Instead, they marched; they sang; they chained themselves to fences. They realized that violence was to happen, but made make sure it was not from them. They decided to love their enemy. It was

hard, sometimes near impossible and it meant making many sacrifices; but in the end, love prevailed.

Another example happened more recently and closer to home. It came from a direction most of us would never consider to even look.

On January 29, exactly 3 weeks ago, a young man walked into a mosque in Quebec City and started to shoot random people with his assault rifle, killing 6 and seriously wounding 5. It was a hate crime, committed with the direct purpose to hurt innocent people as much as possible.



At the funeral later that week, this man spoke: Imam Hassan Guillet. In a mosque that was filled to capacity and included 6 grieving widows and 17 orphans, this Muslim clergyman spoke – not of anger, not of revenge, not of an eye for an eye – but of reconciliation. He refused to think of the killer as an enemy. Instead he said:

“We don't have enemies. I repeat, we don't have enemies. We have some people who don't know us. It should be easier to explain

to these people who do not know us, it is easier to let them know who we are.\* ”

He added that he thought of the killer not as an enemy, but as the 7<sup>th</sup> victim, a man whose life was destroyed by lethal ideas that were planted in his brain by others around him. Being able to say that takes a lot of courage and profound grace. It's a lesson in “loving your enemy” for the real world. We can all learn from this Imam, if only some humility.

Jesus gave this advice because it was the only way he saw to overcome the forces of evil. Jesus is saying that in community and with the help of the Spirit we can do far more than we could ever imagine. We can transform hatred by our love. We can transform greed by our generosity. We can transform violence by our peace.

Yes, that is hard; and no, the outcome is not up to us. What *is* up to us, though, is how we choose to respond to violence of any kind. An eye for an eye – or turning the other cheek?

Amen.

\* <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/in-his-own-words-imam-hassan-guillet-s-address-at-quebec-city-funeral-for-3-mosque-victims-1.3966917>

**Matthew 5:38–48** (Turn the other cheek; give your cloak; go an extra mile)

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. <sup>41</sup> If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbour’ and hate your enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! <sup>45</sup> In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

<sup>46</sup> If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. <sup>47</sup> If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. <sup>48</sup> But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.