

ON NOT HITTING BACK
Matthew 5:38-48
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Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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Sometimes Jesus is simply meddlesome: he insists we forgive seventy times seven. He makes us feel guilty because most likely we have not forgiven one time much less seventy times seven. Other times Jesus is a bit embarrassing: in our morning reading from Matthew he actually tells the disciples that if someone hits them - then they should not hit back - instead they should offer their other cheek for another hit. Is the guy nuts? Is he foolish? I often want to think he is because the only other way to interpret Jesus' words is terrifying! It's terrifying to realize that Jesus means it when he says not to hit back - he really means it when he says we should love our enemies! That is a tall order!

In the space of ten verses in Matthew, Jesus challenges our understanding of the way the world works. He challenges our notion that the best way to get ahead in life is to hit back - he challenges the energy we spend holding grudges - he takes exception to the way we selfishly guard our rights - instead of looking out for the good and needs of others. As much as we do not want to admit it, retaliation and revenge are apparently a necessary part of our lives. One of the first things we teach a little guy growing up - is to hit back. We make fun of those who take a beating without fighting back. We admire the kid on the playground who does not allow the bullies to push him around. We love those old westerns when the hero's revenge on the bad guy plays out. We like to see people punished. We call punishment their just reward.

So, surely Jesus does not mean what he says about not hitting back - how can we turn the other cheek when our culture teaches us to hit back - or shoot back instead? We raise that question today acknowledging increases of hate speech in our country - "Make America White Again" is a billboard we see around the country - we hear stories about brown children being told to go back to Mexico - others being told to return to the country they came from -- the possibility of nuclear war has reared its head. Come on, Jesus, you're telling us don't fight back! That's mightily discomfoting!

Note that Jesus is actually offering us a better and more powerful way to respond to threats. Somehow we believe that if we don't hit back - we lose. We think if we don't fight to win our cause - we have no principles - no values. Nothing could be further from the truth. John Lewis - the civil rights hero - bears Jesus'

teaching about non-violence in the marks on his body - but he bears Jesus' teaching best in his own words.

In an interview last month, Lewis recounted himself at 14: "When I heard about the Supreme Court decision in 1954, I thought the next school year that I would go to a better school. At least it would be a desegregated school. I wouldn't have to ride a broken-down bus, and I would be able to get new books. But it never happened for me. It never happened. But I didn't give up. I didn't become bitter or hostile. I kept the faith." At college he and others studied non-violence every week. They read - they discussed. They practiced what the group called "social drama" in which [they] would act out a skit at a lunch counter. "There would be black and white young people, students, an interracial group, playing the roles of African Americans, or an interracial group playing the roles of white. We went through the motion of someone harassing us, calling us names, pulling our chairs from under us, kicking us or pretending to spit on us. Sometimes we poured cold water on someone. . . . But we were taught that whatever happens we should continue to make eye contact and give the impression, "Yes, you may beat us, but we are human." Lewis continues, "We were to be friendly, try to smile, and just stay nonviolent."

What a profile in courage! What amazing fortitude - What strength of character - we can trace Lewis's non-violent bravery right back to Jesus' words in Matthew. His actions helped to change society - his actions helped to open people's eyes to the evils of segregation.

To be sure, we may be saying - John Lewis had powerful reasons behind his actions - he had good and special training in how to resist violence - We've got no training - and we aren't brave - we don't have his kind of courage. We simply could not stand up to such treatment.

I offer a colleague's story: When my friend was in the 7th grade, his family moved to a new neighborhood in Topeka. He attended a middle school that was almost all black. In addition, my friend was puny. He was the puny white guy. Each afternoon as he walked home, a large 9th grader began to tail and taunt him all the way to his house. The puny kid could run fast - and every day he managed to outrun the bully. But he grew tired of always being afraid - of always running to get away. He thought - "Perhaps if I'm nice to the big guy, he might leave me alone." And the next day when the big kid began to bully and chase the little kid - my friend did not run. Instead, he stopped and turned around, and said, "Hi!" The bully was so shocked he stopped and never bothered my friend again. He gained power over his oppressor not by running or fighting - he gained power through kindness. The puny

kid also gained a sense of his own authority and control - all without throwing a punch.

Jesus invites us to consider our actions: we don't have to hit back - we don't have to shoot back - we don't have to shout back - we don't have to troll back. We can - like John Lewis - look people in the eye and smile at them. We can simply say, "Hi!" like my friend. We can continue to stand firm for what we believe is right - Lewis wanted to eat lunch at a lunch counter - my friend wanted to walk home and not be harassed. There's something of love in both stories - they both point to the power of not hitting back - Jesus did not say those words to make us weak - he offers those words to help make us powerful in love.

Jesus calls us to be citizens of the Kingdom of God - he asks us to let our lights shine - one way we let our lights shine is to engage in what Lewis calls, "active pacifism." He often cites an African proverb: "When you pray, move your feet." When we pray remember the whole community of the saints of God around us - when we pray, let us move our feet - let us turn our cheeks - let us not hit back. Jesus calls us. Let us follow. Alleluia! Amen.