

***Jesus in Tahrir Square:  
Nonviolence as a Response to Evil***  
Matthew 5:38-48

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One night when I was watching reports from Tahrir Square in Cairo I was surprised to see right in front of the camera a large Coptic cross being held up by a protestor. I remembered that about 10% of Egyptians are Coptic Christians; I once heard the Coptic pope preach, because he is a graduate of Princeton Seminary. But there in the midst of this massive and mostly peaceful demonstration against the Mubarak government was the cross of Jesus Christ being raised.

A little later I saw a photo of two men standing arm in arm, one holding up a Quran, one holding up a cross. It was not what I would have expected, given all I have been told about the Middle East and Muslims. Then I heard this story. On Friday at the height of the protests in Tahrir Square, when it was time for the Muslims to bow down and pray on their holy day, Christian protestors joined hands and formed a circle around the Muslims, to protect them from any violence while they were at prayer. And on Sunday, the Muslims returned the favor: while the Christians celebrated the mass, the Muslims formed a circle around them for protection.

The world was amazed at the success of “people power” in Cairo, but I was struck especially by the success of nonviolence. There were a few scenes when protestors counter-attacked against pro-Mubarak thugs and fought fire with fire, literally. But for the most part there was an amazing discipline among the protestors, something that reminded us of Gandhi or Dr. King refusing to take up arms against the oppressor but winning a moral victory that shamed the violent. It seemed to me that Jesus cast a shadow over Tahrir Square—not just in the form of Coptic crosses held by people in the crowd, but by the tradition of nonviolence that has its roots in the teachings of Jesus. Even among Muslims and secular Egyptians, the spirit of Jesus seemed to have influence.

In Thursday’s *New York Times* there was a profile of Gene Sharp, an 83-year-old retired professor from UMass Dartmouth, who runs a little nonprofit out of his modest home in East Boston. Gene Sharp is a teacher of nonviolent resistance. The *Times* and many other sources have reported that he is the brains behind the revolution in Egypt—not personally but through his little book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* which was first written to help people in Burma but came to Egypt by way of Bosnia where it helped Muslims bring down Milosovich. People in Egypt and in countries all over the Middle East have downloaded PDF files of his book from countless web sites. You ought to look at the book sometime; an appendix has a simple list of 198 methods of nonviolent action.

Sharp wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the subject many years ago. One of his sources, of course was Gandhi, and he drew from Martin Luther King and other leaders of nonviolent action in other countries. He says that his thinking is not based on religion or even morality; it’s not even about peace. It’s pragmatic. Nonviolence is what actually works. Those living under dictatorships are tempted to resort to violence. But listen to what Sharp says early in his manual, in italics: *By placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority* (p. 4). The oppressors actually *want* you to use violence, because then they have an excuse to use violence in the name of stability, and the government always has more arms and more soldiers than you do.

This is just where Jesus was coming from in the Sermon on the Mount. He warned against those who would take up arms in trying to restore God’s kingdom in Israel against the Romans, and told them

that if they did so there would not be one stone of the Temple left standing on another. Jesus wept because his people did not know the things that make for peace. At the same time, he was not saying that injustice does not matter or that we should just accept our lot in life as victims. He was telling us that we should resist evil with good, that we should stand up to evil not with violence but with self-respect and genuine concern for our enemies.

I don't know if either Gene Sharp or the leaders of the revolt in Cairo would acknowledge it, but Jesus was behind the triumph of the people. Both Dr. King and Gandhi acknowledged that the source of their practice of nonviolence was Jesus himself. Gandhi once said, "The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians." The teaching of Jesus and we might even say "the spirit of Jesus" was at work in Tahrir Square and is at work in other places where people resist evil with nonviolence and love.

The old way, Jesus says, was to do justice by inflicting injury on the injurer. If they poked out your eye, you poke out their eye, no more, no less. But, as Sarah Palin might ask, "How's that workin' out for ya?" Anger leads to more anger which leads to violence which leads to more violence. The world is in a mess. Jesus says that in the kingdom of God there is another way: do not resist evil with violence but with self-control and love.

The first example Jesus gives is someone striking your right cheek. I need a volunteer to come up and strike me on the right cheek. Jesus lived in a world where everyone was right-handed, as in some cultures today; your left hand is for unclean stuff. If you strike me on the right cheek, how are you going to do it. A punch would land on my left cheek. An open-handed slap would me on my left cheek. The only way you can strike my right cheek is with the back of your hand. That's not a fight; that's an insult.

That's the way you slap an underling. Don't give me no sass, boy. A Roman soldier might do it to a Jew. A slave-owner might do it to a slave. If you are treated that way—with utter disrespect—don't choose between fight or flight. Instead, Jesus says, just stand there, and turn your other cheek. Offer him your left cheek. Then the oppressor either has to hit you outright or back down. He can't dismissively backhand you on your left cheek. It's a matter of saying "I refuse to be humiliated. I am a human being. Look at me. I have dignity." Jesus isn't saying that you should be a coward or compliant. He is saying that you refuse to be degraded or drawn into violence.

Jesus' second example is if you are dragged into court. Who would be dragging you into court? As James 2:6 says, it is the *rich* who drag you into court. Most court appearances in Jesus' day were to collect debts. Partly because of heavy Roman taxation, the middle class had been driven into debt and lost their land to the rich. They were upside down on their mortgages. They had borrowed to buy food. Now they were broke. So if a rich person drags you into court to take your inner garment away from you, what can you do? You're not going to win the case. Back then people only wore two garments—an inner garment or tunic, and an outer garment or coat, which the Jewish law said you could not take as collateral because the poor needed it for warmth. So the creditor goes after your inside clothes, leaving you your coat. What can you do? Jesus says, "Give him your coat, too" even though the law does not require you to. Where does that leave you? Naked! The Jewish taboo on nakedness fell primarily on the person who looked at the naked person, so the creditor would be shamed. And then you walk home with no clothes in a kind of protest, gathering a crowd as you go, and public opinion begins to turn against the creditor.

You see, Jesus is not saying to be a wuss. He's saying to take the initiative and act nonviolently in response to oppression.

The third example is clear enough. The Roman soldiers had the right to commandeer civilians and get them to carry their equipment. "If anyone forces you to go one mile"—Jesus doesn't have to say this is a Roman, because "mile" is a Roman word, not a Jewish word—then go beyond the one mile the

law allows him to require of you. Carry his pack a second mile voluntarily, because then you have seized the initiative. You have said to him, “I am not a beast of burden; I am a human being; I am helping you as an act of compassion rather than an act of obedience. Even if you don’t care about my well-being, I am more humane and I *do* care about yours.”

The fourth example may seem out of place, but it’s another example of someone imposing on you. It’s a kind of boundary violation, someone forcing himself on you and asking something inappropriate. If someone begs from you or asks to borrow something—and we all know what “borrow” usually means—just give it to them. Don’t give because they have any claim on you or because the law requires you to, but because that’s the kind of person you are: a generous person who cares more about the other person than about your own desires. Don’t worry yourself about whether they are scamming you or not. Your role is not to be the judge but to be generous. As they are pouring out their tale and their excuses, tell them you don’t even need to hear it, you’ll just give them what you can. In that way you take the initiative away from those who seek to impose their will on you. It’s not about your story; it’s about my generosity as a follower of Jesus.

I went to a very good class on parenting this week being taught by Sue Littlefield. The focus for this series of sessions is healthy boundaries. I went partly because I’m on the Prevention Task Force which sponsors the class, and partly because Becca always tells me I need better boundaries. She means by that first of all that I don’t need to tell you everything, but also that I need to learn to say No. And that was Sue’s focus: having a healthy boundary to your self that allows you to hold some things inside and not spew them all over everybody, but also being able to say No and resist when people try to push their stuff all over you and control your time and your life.

Jesus, I think, would agree with that if you could ever get him to talk in psychological terms. But he goes beyond that. Yes, you need healthy boundaries so that you don’t let the person who begs or the person who slaps you control your response. You have to have a strong sense of self and self-worth to be able to avoid the two traps of hitting back or running away. But true strength is not just being able to say No to the person who is demanding something unreasonable of you. True strength is being able to *love* the one who violates your boundaries.

The old way, Jesus says, was to love your neighbors—your own kind—and hate your enemies. That’s the way it is for most people today, even most people that claim to be Christians, not to mention Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. Hate is good. Hate is patriotic. But Jesus says, I am showing you a new way. You are to be more like your Father in heaven, who clearly pours his blessings on the evil as well as on the good. You who live in the kingdom of heaven now are to love your enemies and pray good things for those who persecute you.

Yes, we do have enemies, even if we are good people. Maybe *especially* if we are good people, and certainly if we are loyal to Jesus. There are some people in this world who would not be sorry to learn you are dead. Even on this island. Those are the very people you are charged to love.

We pride ourselves on loving our families and fellow church members and perhaps even fellow Americans. Jesus says, So what? If you love people that are good to you, big deal. The Mafia does that. Terrorists do that. Scumbags do that. The challenge—the test of whether you are like your heavenly Father or not—is whether you love people that drive you crazy, people that disrespect you and wish you were gone. God loves people who wish he didn’t exist. So must we, if we are to become like him, if we are going to live into his image that he has built into our humanity.

I don’t think we can do that without a strong sense that we ourselves have been loved. Most people have egos so fragile that if they are disrespected they have to fight back in order to preserve their sense of worth. Most men respond to violence with violence because their sense of manhood depends on it. But Jesus says to be stronger than that. Know who you are as children of God and part of the new

humanity that lives under God's reign. Have that kind of goodness that goes way beyond tit for tat but is based on the goodness of God. We ourselves have received grace, so we treat others with grace, even and especially if they are mean to us and fail to treat us with respect. The bully of all people is in need of love and understanding—not a response of fight or flight but a response of “I am a human being and so are you. Come, let us reason together.”

The first miracle of Tahrir Square was that people lost their fear. They stopped seeing themselves as helpless victims. This is what Jesus urges us to do as well. But the second miracle is to refuse to be violent and inflict wounds on those who have wounded you. It is to see that even your enemies—the police, the agents of the government—are themselves wounded and, as Jesus saw clearly, they don't know what they are doing. For us as Christians our calling is to love our enemies as God already loves them, to want what is best for them, to want to see them grow as we want to see ourselves grow. If there is to be peace on earth—or even on our island—it has to begin with self-respect that extends to respect for the genuine value of our enemies and even to behavior that can truly be called love. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.