

## Quid Pro Quo

Sermon at Winter Theological Event  
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The Gospel reading for this service is not one that's popular these days. *“Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”*

Try running on that as a political platform in this country and see how far you get.

I know pastors who are uncomfortable with this part of the Sermon on the Mount; I've read that too much emphasis on namby-pamby verses like these is a big reason why so many men are turned off by Christianity. I've read commentators who argue that Jesus didn't really mean what it appears he said, and I've heard sermons that strive mightily to shape the naïve, goody-two-shoes impracticality of Jesus' statement into something more rugged that can stand up to the harsh realities of the world.

Hey, we all know better than to take Jesus' words about turning the other cheek seriously. We know that what Jesus said, if taken literally, would ruin society; allow evil to prosper, tyrants to thrive, and criminals to run amok. That's just the way of the world. So Jesus could not have really meant it. He was either exaggerating or jerking their chains, trying to get them to think, right?

I mean, just look at Jesus' life. When he was confronted by soldiers and a mob in the Garden of Gethsemane, remember how he looked them square in the eye and said, “Bring it on, punk! Make my day!”

And you recall how when Peter struck at one of the soldiers with the sword, Jesus winked at him and said, “Thanks for having my back. Now let's you and me teach these guys a lesson they won't soon forget.”

Don't you just love the part in Matthew when they began beating Jesus and spitting on him at the court of Pontius Pilate, and Jesus kneed one of them in the groin and beat the living daylight out of a dozen more before they finally overcame him with sheer force of numbers?

Remember that impressive body count he left in his wake in the streets of Jerusalem before they finally got him up to the hill on Golgotha? Or how about when that guy tried to pound the nail in his hands, and Jesus backhanded the dude so hard that all his front teeth went flying?

Remember that scene in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*, when one of the criminals on the cross mocked Jesus, and God responded by sending some birds to peck out the villain's eyes? That's what I'm talkin' about. None of this turning-the-other-cheek drivel.

My personal favorite part of the Passion story of the Gospel was when Jesus was hanging on the cross, and in one of his seven last words, he prayed to God, “Get a good look at each one of these sorry scumbags. I want you to remember their faces, and when I’m gone, hunt them down like the cowardly dogs they are, and make them suffer as much pain as they have caused me.”

And finally, the satisfying climax of the Easter story, when Jesus rises from the dead and sweeps through the city and the Temple, taking bloody vengeance on the Sanhedrin and all the evil-doers.

Oh, wait . . . none of that happened, did it?

Come to think of it, throughout the entire passion story, Jesus did exactly what he preached in our text for today. Exactly. He responded to violence by turning the other cheek. He loved his enemies.

When Jesus says something and then practices exactly what he said, I take that as a pretty good indication that he meant exactly what he said about turning the other cheek.

So now we’re back to being uncomfortable. Okay, maybe Jesus really meant that, but we cannot, as responsible leaders go too far with this because, as we all know, turning the other cheek isn’t practical for us mortals in our sinful world. It would allow evil to go unchecked. It doesn’t work.

That’s an interesting argument. Look throughout history at how effective the “eye-for-an-eye” thing has been. How effective has it been in soothing religious conflict throughout the ages? How has it worked to end violence in Northern Ireland, in Serbia, among the tribes of Sudan and central Africa, and personal feuds in every nation and community? How well has it worked in bringing peace on earth, goodwill among the Israelis and Palestinians? How effective has it been in turning the Middle East into a paradise of loving friendship?

Okay, an eye-for-an-eye isn’t a perfect system, but isn’t it an effective deterrent and arbiter of justice in our legal system?

Well, yes, it has some function as a stopgap measure in our sinful world. But an eye-for-an-eye is woefully inadequate in the long run because our views are colored by perspective and experience. Since these are different for everyone, everyone’s view of equivalence is different. So even if you could produce a perfect balance, perfect justice, the perspective among a great many people will be that you did not.

Did the eye-for-an-eye legal system create peace in race relations in the Rodney King or O.J. Simpson verdicts or did it make it worse? Has the “don’t get mad, get even” mantra produced a peaceful, civil and productive political climate in our country?

Compare those results to what Jesus's action of turning the other cheek accomplished. New life, salvation, and eternal loving relationship with God for you and me and billions of people.

*Love your enemies*, said Jesus. *For if you only love those who love you, what good does that do?* A Latin phrase for doing good to those who do good to you is "Quid pro quo." And who is our most famous contemporary associated with that phrase? "Quid pro quo, Clarice; quid pro quo." That would be Hannibal Lector, from *Silence of the Lambs*.

Let's see, the most soulless monster in modern literature advocates an eye-for-an-eye, a policy that has ripped apart the world with never-ending cycles of hatred and violence; Jesus advocates turning the other cheek and loving enemies, which has brought new life and relationship with God forever.

Which are we going to go with here? The choice would seem to be a no-brainer, yet after prudent deliberation, almost everyone shrugs apologetically at Jesus, and leaves him standing there alone as they walk over to Hannibal Lector's side and choose quid pro quo over turning the other cheek as the model for how we're going to live our lives.

Jesus was serious in his command to turn the other cheek. And he was right. Eye-for-an-eye doesn't work. Never has, never will. Turning the other cheek works—it diffuses anger and hatred.

One reason we reject this command of Jesus could be because of a common mistake that is made about turning the other cheek. Several insightful Biblical commentators have shown what Jesus is advocating is not a passive inaction, letting the bad guys have their way. Jesus is advocating an action—just not the one we expect.

Perhaps the best example I've seen of what Jesus is teaching here comes from the book *Waterlily* by Ella Cara Deloria. In it, one of the elders of the Yankton Sioux tells the oral history of the intratribal murder of a young man in their village.

The relatives of the victim angrily debate the punishment they will inflict on the murderer when he is caught. At the end of the debate, the oldest relative rises to speak. He agrees that the murder should be avenged with the death of the murderer. That would be justice.

Then, after a pause, he says, "Yet there is a better way. That the fire of hate may not burn on in his heart or in ours, we shall take that better way, the harder way."

He asked each of his relatives to go to their homes and bring their most prized possession as a gift to the murderer. "Though he has hurt us, we shall make him something to us, in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. Or your uncle or cousin? From now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us."

The family was stunned, but after a long and bitter silence, they came to accept his words.

They caught the murderer and brought him to the council. He did not try to run away; he knew he had killed a man and was ready to pay with his life. He entered with eyes averted, steeling himself for the worst.

Instead, they offered him the pipe of peace, saying, “Smoke with these your new kinsmen seated here. For they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here. By these presents which they have brought here for you, they would have you know that whatever love and compassion they had for him is now yours, forever.”

As they said these words, tears began to course down the slayer’s cheeks. “And you may be sure that he proved himself an even better kinsman than many who had right of birth, because the price of his redemption had come so high.”

The elder concludes, “You may well imagine how proud must have been the spirit of the slain youth, to see his relatives doing the harder thing!”

This story, while powerfully moving, doesn’t make us feel any better. Sure, logically, there is no comparison between the results the Yankton obtained by actively turning the other cheek and what likely would have happened had they demanded an eye- for-an-eye.

But we can’t deny the emotional element to this. Doing what the Yankton did requires almost superhuman courage and spiritual discipline. As much as I want to follow Jesus, as much as I believe in what he said in today’s passage, I’m not going to stand here and say I could have done what they did. I think it’s safe to say that not many people in this room of committed disciples, passionate about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, could have done it.

So what are we in our day and age to take from these overwhelmingly difficult commands to love the enemy and turn the other cheek, other than a crushing guilt over our inability to follow Jesus?

Let me suggest two things. First, acknowledge that Jesus said to turn the other cheek and love the enemy, that he meant it, that he lived it, and that he was right. Jesus showed us that there is a better way than an eye-for-an-eye; we will experience new life, the world will experience new life in the reign of God by following that way as best we can.

The courage of the Yankton may be beyond what we can accomplish right now. Let us then follow the better way as far as our courage and faith allows.

I’m not trained as a marriage counselor and usually refer couples to other, more knowledgeable sources before a wedding. But I do try to convey something about what Jesus said in these verses because the results are so clear:

If you go into marriage, as most couple do, with the goal of making it a 50-50 shared relationship, you are putting your marriage at risk from the very start. Because 50-50 is the same principle as an eye-for-an-eye, quid pro quo. Again, it sounds good and it sounds fair, but it doesn't work.

Because everyone's perspective is different, no one agrees on where that 50-50 line is. It is human nature to believe ourselves more generous than we are, and others to be less generous than they are. We always believe the 50-50 line to be closer to ourselves than it really is.

So when both sides strive for 50-50 in a relationship, each will see the other crossing into what they believe is their side of the line. Aim for a 50-50 marriage and both individuals will spend their lives guarding the line and attacking any encroachment. That is a formula for fighting, not peace.

There's a better way, a harder way. If both parties go into a marriage determined that their first task is to look after their partner's interest, that their partner will get better treatment than they themselves receive, what's going to happen?

Neither will be guarding the line. Neither will be monitoring the other side for encroachment. Neither side will be fighting to maintain the integrity of their 50% territory. They will give; and they will receive in turn. That is a formula for peace.

So it works in daily life. An eye-for-an-eye will not usher in the reign of God in human lives. There is a better way. A harder way. In these verses, Jesus makes clear that God's command to love our neighbor as ourselves does not follow the 50-50 blueprint. That doesn't work. Something more is needed. The better, harder way is to put others first.

The second thing we can draw from this passage is gratitude. Gratitude that Jesus took the better way, the harder way. Thank God that Jesus had the courage to live out his words, to turn the other cheek and to love the enemy, and to die on the cross. In so doing he went way over my side of the line to cover my rebelliousness, my selfishness, and my lack of courage.

God has responded to the pain my sin has caused by bringing me back into the fold and showering me with gifts. God has stunned me by letting me know that whatever love and compassion God would have had for me had I been the person God wanted me to be, is now mine, forever. Thanks be to God.

*Prayer: Lord God, it is our fervent prayer and hope that each of us proves to be an even better kinsman than if we had earned the right of relationship with you, because the price of our redemption has come so high.*