I miss my Dad. I spent a few days this week with my Mom in Ansonia, CT, where I grew up. The bedroom where I sleep is a place where my father always feels present for me. Dad died in January of 2006. There’s picture of him with my cousin’s son Wyatt hanging on the wall. It was taken one of the last Christmases he was able to travel to his sister’s home in the woods of Goshen, CT. Dad and Wyatt had been sharing a moment together and when they turned to the camera they both had impish grins on their faces. It always feels like they are looking straight at me. I can’t help but smile back.

Along with the photos in that room is a plaque marking his retirement. It says *“To Warren Spinning in recognition for 36 years of loyalty and dedication while in the service of Sikorsky aircraft. We your friends and colleagues wish to congratulate you on this fine achievement.”* My Dad was not an educated man in the sense that he received a degree from a university, but he was a wicked smart and creative guy. He was an artist and craftsman. He could build anything and he was an amazing cook.

And he knew stuff! He was the guy that you always wanted on your team for Trivial Pursuit. He would just pull obscure facts from out of the ether. Dad always said he was “font of worthless knowledge”, but those facts stuck with me. I was always surprised by the way that my father would bring everyday sayings to life by showing me their origins and meaning. On a recent cold night I heard someone say it was a *three dog night* and I remember Dad explaining to me the expression came from Siberia, and meant it is so cold you would need three Husky dogs in bed with you to keep warm. In my house it’s cats, but they are usually looking to get warm themselves!

Today’s passage from the latter part of the Sermon on the Mount holds many of those kinds of phrases we have heard so times in our everyday lives.

*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth…*

*Turn the other cheek.*

*Go the extra mile.*

These phrases that Jesus brings out in his teaching are a part of our everyday vernacular. People toss them about and I would venture a guess that most do not know their origin or meaning. As read and researched for today, I was surprised at what I came away with and how they came alive for me in ways I never before considered.

*An eye for an eye* is one of those phrases that we hear used when revenge and retaliation are on the menu. In the ancient world, it was legal to take revenge upon one who took your eye by exacting the same or worse injury on your enemy. In fact you might even be within your rights to take both their eyes and those of their family members as well. So though Leviticus and Exodus and Deuteronomy all have reference to retaliatory justice, this *eye for and eye*, *tooth for a tooth* was really meant to bring *limits* upon revenge, allowing compensation, like for like, only for what had been taken, and no more, thus preventing escalating cycles of violence and personal vendettas. Still, it sounds very brutal to our ears. But, before we shake our heads and say that seeking revenge or retributive justice does not hold a significant influence in our time and place, perhaps Jesus’ words are calling us to pay closer attention.

Jesus says, “don’t resist a person that intends to do you evil.” Wow, really? That’s a bit counterintuitive, don’t you think? Perhaps that’s not quite what it sounds like. But, Jayson Byassee from Duke Divinity School minces no words in his commentary. He writes *“Our constant temptation to boil down the hard particulars of Jesus into a mushy hallmark card, is put here to rout. Jesus….will have none of it.”*

So, how about turning the other cheek? How many of us would be willing to set aside one assault by inviting another? You see, I think that many of us forget in this familiar saying that after we turn one cheek away from our assailant, we should be expecting to receive another smack immediately after. There are a number of explanations offered by theologians for this offensive gesture, but most agree that no matter which hand is used, and no matter what position it is in when the hand hits the cheek, this action is meant to deliver an insult and would have caused great shame to the recipient.

But think about this, how would offering to accept another blow affect the other person? Has there ever been a time when you were so frustrated or angry that a nasty or snide comment just came out of your mouth? What if the person that was at the receiving end of your diatribe said, “It’s OK, go ahead, give it to me again”? Isn’t it likely you would be at a total loss for words? I know I would, and in fact I would most probably ask for forgiveness.

Going the extra mile is a desirable thing in this day and age. Who doesn’t want to be known as someone that will put in that extra effort and get a bit of recognition for it? But this particular example Jesus gives us is so much more than winning Brownie points for our annual performance evaluation. Roman law allowed for soldiers to command ordinary citizens to carry a burden for a certain distance, in this example, a mile. That is all that would have been required to meet the forced obligation to the Empire. But going that extra mile would have done much more than exceeding the soldier’s expectations. It would have meant that someone else, perhaps a member of your own community, would have been spared that burden for that day. It might also have turned the tables and put your oppressor in your debt to some degree.

The last example Jesus puts forth – the surrendering of not one, but all garments in a lawsuit – would render a person naked before their debtors and embarrass everyone involved. Jesus turns everything on its head and it’s so often lost on us, as it may well have been a puzzle to the listeners of curiously compelling teacher. But wait, there’s more!

Jesus takes, as he often does, something familiar from Hebrew scripture or from everyday living and gives us a new way of seeing God’s world. *“You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* ***But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*** That’s more than a tall order in any time or age. Jesus, can’t we just offer up our other cheek? Carry a burden another mile? Suffer naked embarrassment?

Several years ago I worked with a woman that did her utmost to be the most unlikeable person I had ever met. She interrupted and corrected me and other members of the team in front of clients. She took credit for other people’s work. And this was the cardinal sin as far as I was concerned…. she was rude and demeaning to servers in restaurants. To me, that is the ultimate measure of a person; the way that they treat others. My aggravation with her got to the point that I would complain and rage on and on about her and focus on every little thing she would do.

Anne Lamott, in her book Traveling Mercies says this about holding on to anger and resentments. *“Holding on to anger is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”*  At the time, I was working with a personal coach. She suggested that I might try praying for this woman during my daily prayer practice. I’ll admit I thought she was crazy and I told her so. But I’m a relatively willing person, and I was paying for the advice, so I gave it a try. My prayer was something like this. Please God help this person not be such a jerk. And oh yeah, I could use some help too.

It took time, but I started to occasionally be able to see myself in her place. It’s funny, she never changed from what I could tell, but I was more able to find places where we could coexist when needed. It wasn’t perfect, but my eyes, and the way that I saw her, was altered. Ultimately, it was me that was changed through prayer.

I can be so back in that place right now – critical and discontented with the climate in our country. So focused outside of myself and on the other that my insides start to shift over to the negative. It seems that I might be so much simpler to just stay around people that agree with me, people who share my views. But Jesus won’t let me off the hook. He says, *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”* Clearly, God has high expectations for us. And Jesus is not admonishing us; he is encouraging us to be more, do more that we think we can.

John Lewis, U.S. Congressman, Civil Rights Movement leader, friend and contemporary of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., recently spoke with Krista Tippett, host of NPR’s On Being. He talked about how the young people in the civil right movement learned and prepared themselves for nonviolent resistance long before they ever sat down at a lunch counter. “Be friendly, try to smile, be polite, and just stay non-violent. And during the nonviolent campaign in a city like Nashville and so many parts of the American South, you never had one incident of someone striking back or hitting back…..It’s not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence.”

What Jesus calls forth in us, the perfection he sees in us, the Holy temple that Paul recognizes in us today is about our internal transformation into what God made us to be. The resistance movement that Jesus leads us to is a radically different way of refusing to cooperate with evil in our world. It is the way of peace and love, the way of living in communities of diverse beliefs and thinking. The Love we are called into is not the love of affection, but something much deeper and often harder to initially uncover, and it takes learning and practice and prayer. It is the sense of willing the good for another being. It’s not simply about being nicer to each other. Holy is a journey that bends us away from ourselves and toward higher standards of being with others. “Perfection is less about getting this right and more about loving as God loves.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And to paraphrase our psalm today we pray – Teach us your way, give us your understanding, lead us in your path and turn our hearts and our eyes toward you our God. Amen.

1. Barbara Essex, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1. Pg.384. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)