

Taming the Bully  
Matthew 5:38-42

A sermon by Reverend Debra Jarvis  
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My home church is University Congregational where we've had the wonderful experience of having Charles McCullough's sculpture in our sanctuary for some time now. I have loved it because it's kind of like having spiritually truthful comic books all over the church.

In every sculpture I find passion, humor and truth. He creates these goofy, funny-looking people who—look just like us. He shows us exactly how wise and how radical Jesus really was.

But how wise and how radical is it after getting slapped, to turn the other cheek so we can get slapped again? That seems crazy. So in “Turn the Other Cheek” we see a guy in what looks like a military uniform, maybe some sort of dictator. I think this is good artistic choice because dictators oppress and humiliate and kill people. So what are we to make of Jesus's advice to turn the other cheek?

Now this is where I have to stop and talk about Christian scripture scholar Walter Wink who shed enormous light on what

this parable means. At first read, this parable seems to say that we are being asked to submit, back down—become a doormat.

But the Wonderful, Wonderful Walter Wink gives us the cultural context which changes everything about all three of these parables. Now I'm sure many of you have heard or read this before, because he wrote *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* in 1998. But if you haven't: well, I can't wait to see you slap your foreheads and say, "Oh-h-h-h-h!"

Here's the deal: in Biblical times a master would backhand his slave across the face to put him in his place—the right hand only because the left hand was reserved for "unclean" things or as Charles McCullough writes, "purposes of hygiene." So turn to your neighbor and as you face another, pretend you are going to give them a backhand slap with your right hand. Pretend!

Now pretend you've received the slap and turn the other cheek. Pretend to try and slap the other cheek. Impossible, right? We know we can't use our left hands. But what about our fists? How about a punch instead of a slap?

Well, the social structure of the time made it clear that if two people are fighting with fists, then they are social equals. You wouldn't want your slave to think he is your equal!

So turning the other cheek is a Third Way between submitting and returning violence for violence. It is a way that lets

you preserve your self-respect and dignity. It doesn't guarantee that you won't then get a flogging but you have claimed your own power and resisted in a non-violent way.

It's the same thing in the parable, Give Your Cloak as Well. The principle here is the same: I'll give you more than you asked for and in so doing you are shamed by my nakedness.

If you look closely at Charles's sculpture it's hilarious because the naked debtor guy who offers his cloak has a big goofy grin on his face and the judge and the creditor are like, "Ew-w-w, stop!" They can't even look at the guy. Nakedness is taboo in Judaism and the shame falls on the person causing the nakedness or viewing the nakedness.

And hopefully, the creditor will have some kind of awakening in realizing that he is the source of profound suffering. It's a way of unmasking his cruelty. So ultimately, the hope here is not so much *shaming* the bully as it is *taming* the bully. "I was blind, but now I see."

Of course it's the same thing with Go the Second Mile. The Roman law was that any soldier could walk up to you and make you carry his load for a mile. For one mile. That's all. So if you say, "Oh, let me carry another mile," now the soldier is breaking military code. He might get a reprimand, he might be flogged--he doesn't know what's going to happen now! He's totally off

balance. You can see it's another way, a Third Way to resist and to keep your self-respect and claim your power of choice.

And if you look at Charles's sculpture you have this soldier with his mouth as if to say, "Hey, wait a minute. Put that down."

It's clear that Jesus opposed the bullying of the Roman government. Oppose the bullying of the government! I thought, "Oh yes! We must see these parables in national terms. Let's stand up to the bully!" This was very easy for me to see how important this is especially because in a few days we are going to inaugurate someone who seems to me to be a professional bully.

So I was feeling really good about taking this sermon and these parables to the national level. And even the global level! Because it's very easy to see how the violent bullies are running countries all over the world.

On the national level we have some pretty cool Third Way things going on. Next week there are Women's Marches happening all over America. There's one right here in Seattle and we're encouraged to wear Pussyhats as we march silently through the streets.

Now to me, this is a fantastic "Third Way" to react to humiliation. We are responding to our president-elect's remark about grabbing women. We are responding in a way that is serious and at the same humorous. We are wearing hats that make us look

like cats—a play on the insulting slang word that was used. We are not simply shaking our heads and “tsking, tsking” or taking to social media and complaining. We are saying, “We will not take it. We are coming together and we are strong together. And we are wearing Pussyhats to reappropriate the word and turn it into an identity of strength.”

And really, what is more effective than lampooning the powers that be? It’s not violent, but it is resistant. And always, we carry the hope that the bully will not be shamed but be tamed, unmasked and made aware.

It may seem like a silly thing: thousands of women wearing Pussyhats silently marching through the streets. How can a non-violent march possibly have any effect?

Tomorrow is a holiday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and if anyone in America was about non-violent resistance, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. Even if a march or protest does nothing to immediately change a situation, it has the effect of galvanizing those who participate. And it cannot be ignored.

So it’s pretty easy to think of lots of global, national examples of bullying and oppression. And it’s pretty easy to think of personal examples: an abusive boss or hostile neighbor or domineering partner. It’s clear that Jesus instructions pertain to

those situations too: find a Middle Way. Don't lie down and take it. Don't rise up and attack.

I think there is an even more difficult situation of oppression and humiliation. It's one that can make dealing with political or personal oppression seem almost easy. And that is dealing with our Inner Bully. That ruthless, aggressive, shaming voice that we often hear in our own heads.

My Inner Bully can be brutal, "You're lazy, you're fat, you're undisciplined!" Yes, like our national bully, the Inner Bully really has no grasp on reality.

I was discussing this with a friend and describing my Inner Bully and he said, "Oh, yes, mine is called Lazy, Fatty, Failure Boy! LFFB!" Now if you met this guy, he is one of the most hard-working, kind, compassionate, funny, smart and loving men I know. I would totally date him if I weren't married and were twenty years younger and he weren't gay. So he is a jewel and yet—get a load of this Inner Bully!

And once the Inner Bully gets going, it can be paralyzing. So what is the Third Way here? How do we resist non-violently? How can we unmask the Inner Bully with some compassion and humor? Jesus is all about Inner Bully eradication. So how to do this?

My friend said he invites the Inner Bully to come into the Light. "Come in, sit down. Let's go over these charges." He does

a kind spiritual aikido where you take the power of your attacker and go with it instead of pushing back.

“Lazy? Oh, yeah, I’m totally lazy. I am a Master of Laziness. But not all the time.”

“Fatty? Maybe. But this is simply a physical issue and not a moral problem. It is not my whole identity. What else you got?”

By now the Inner Bully is getting uncomfortable. Because once you bring the oppressive, humiliating charges out in the open and examine them, so much of their power is lost.

Oh, yes, the last charge: failure. “That’s broad. Can you be more specific? I have failed at many things. And I’ve succeeded at many others—especially successful in confronting my Inner Bully.”

I mean, isn’t it shocking how we can so brutally beat ourselves up? I think the Inner Bully gets going when we feel disconnected from God. And you know, that’s so easy to get disconnected, isn’t it? We get so distracted and overwhelmed by life that we forget that we are totally and unconditionally loved by God. And when we forget how we are loved, it’s easy to react violently or just passively take what life gives us.

Now I’m a big believer in mantras, words that you can call on that will bring you back, get you centered, get you grounded. So

for the past few weeks my mantra has been, “Channel grace.” Just that—two words, “Channel grace.”

So when I’m feeling annoyed by someone, tempted to say something super snarky, I heard my mantra, “Channel grace.” This works. This is Third Way. I’m not violently reacting or passively lying down, I’m listening and channeling grace.

Our inner selves are important! Who we are in the world is really so little about what we look like, or what we are capable of doing. Who we are in the world is about who we are *inside*. And that’s why we have to tame the inner bully.

Maybe now you are wondering about what could be your mantra. Well, as a congregation you’ve got an excellent one right in front of you: “In Remembrance of Me.” Isn’t that perfect?

Whatever you are thinking, doing or saying just tack on at the end, “In Remembrance of Me.” So I’m cut off in traffic and I’m tempted to honk and curse—“In Remembrance of Me.” Oh, no, Jesus, I didn’t mean you. I meant *that* guy!”

But as Christians, everything we do is in remembrance of Jesus. Those four words slow us down enough to consider a Third Way of responding. So maybe I smile and wave at this reckless driver. “Sure, c’mon in.” That way we keep our dignity and self-respect and perhaps—tame the bully.

So tomorrow on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day we can celebrate Dr. King's devotion to finding a Third Way. We can celebrate that in this country we do have the freedom to march—to march wearing any kind of hats we want. And tomorrow whatever we're doing we'll remember that Jesus instructed us to, "Do this in remembrance of me."