

1 Sermon, March 14, 2012 – Wednesday in Lent

Texts: Matthew 5:39-45, Proverbs 11:16-30

Title: "Responding to Aggression"

It is interesting that Jesus gives some very specific examples of how to respond to aggression.

If you are struck on the right cheek, turn the other cheek.

Demonstrate it.

Do not resist an evildoer – but don't do nothing, either.

What about giving up your coat and your shirt, too?

Again not resisting an evildoer, but still opposing them.

What about going the second mile?

Many would not consider a Roman soldier an evildoer, but most Judeans in Jesus' time would have.

Again, not resisting, but turning it around.

Now, how do we translate that into our time?

How do we respond to aggression? How do we respond to the insult at work, or someone cutting in line at the movies, or a physical threat? How do we respond even to a heated political disagreement?

Jesus gives us a model of some well-thought-out responses. How are we going to be able to respond to the aggression and insults of others?

1. Allow the other freedom

Well, first of all, you leave the other person freedom to maneuver. You don't corner someone. They need to have choice. Jesus always gave choices. You don't respond by trying to hoodwink the other person. You give them something to think about, yes. But you don't cut off their options.

For instance, when Jesus called his disciples, he did not grab them by the ear, he invited them to come follow him.

When the man came to him with a dispute about dividing the inheritance with his brother, Jesus refused to fall into the trap of telling them what to do.

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When we're threatened by aggression, it's not the first thing we think of: "This person who's persecuting me – I need to give them some freedom to respond to whatever I do."

But if we want to follow Jesus, we need to respect the other person and their freedom.

Or else we'll think that they're supposed to do just what we think they should do. And the funny thing is that they don't think like us!

2. Be centered

The second thing that is clear in Jesus' suggestions of how to respond to aggression is that you could never do this unless you are centered.

Aggression from someone else usually sets us off balance.

Only when we've got a firm foundation – when we're centered and confident – can we really respond creatively to aggression.

There may be other ways, but I believe the best foundation is our faith. The best centering is trust in God.

When you take a deep breath and pray and center yourself in Christ, there is an actual physical grounding. Try it sometime. Have someone push on you when you're upset or distracted. You easily lose your balance. Then pray and focus on Christ – if someone pushes on you then, you'll have a much firmer foundation.

There's a true story I read years ago in a book about people responding to violence. There was a man who was accosted by some young men and asked for his money.

He looked at them and said, "I am a man of peace." The muggers left.

Similarly, there was a woman who had been reading the Psalms about being covered by God's wings. When the robbers confronted her, she said, "You can't harm me, I'm covered with feathers!" The robbers left.

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3. Stay curious

Speaking of feathers, feathers can tickle. And if we want to respond well to aggression, our imagination has to be tickled. Our curiosity has to be tickled. We need to know something about that other person who is threatening us.

Jesus knew some things about Roman soldiers. He knew some things about wealthy owners who abused their slaves. Jesus knew the kind of man who would take you to court and sue you for your shirt.

If we want to respond well to aggression, we want to know something about our tormentor, about his or her motivations.

If we don't know anything about their motivations, how can we encourage them to think or act differently?

The gospels tell us that when the rich man came to Jesus asking how to inherit eternal life, Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus was interested in what motivated and drove this man.

So Jesus asked the man what *he* thought. And Jesus listened to the response.

To respond well to aggression, we must see the other as a human being, a child of God from whom we might even be able to learn something.

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4. Find a way to point out why the aggression doesn't make sense

The last part of Jesus' way of responding to aggression is the most difficult. It is somehow pointing out how the aggression doesn't make sense.

The examples that Jesus gives are absolutely beautiful in their simplicity. The Roman Soldier realizes that it's not in his best interest to antagonize the public. The cheek-slapper realizes that cheek-slapping is not going to produce compliance. The one who litigates for a tunic realizes how unfair it is to do so.

In the previous example, the mugger realizes it is not good to rob a man of peace.

When the society itself was the aggressor in the segregated South, Rosa Parks sat in the wrong part of the bus. Society itself began to see the contradiction in segregation. When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave people a different dream, it caused them to see that inequality was a form of violence.

Jesus himself challenged the assumptions of aggressors. When the Pharisees tried to trap him by asking him whether it was OK to pay tax to the Romans, Jesus asked: "Whose image is on the coin?"

Jesus said, "Pay Caesar what is Caesar's, and pay God what is God's." I'm sure it challenged those Pharisees.

You can see that Jesus really cared about peacemaking, with the amount he said about it.

So let's find ways of overcoming evil with good. Amen.

5 Sermon, March 14, 2012 – Wednesday in Lent

"But I say to you, 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. "You have heard that it was 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, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Matthew 5:39-45, NRSV.

"A gracious woman gets honor, but she who hates virtue is covered with shame. The timid become destitute, but the aggressive gain riches. Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm. The wicked earn no real gain, but those who sow righteousness get a true reward. Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but whoever pursues evil will die. Crooked minds are an abomination to the LORD, but those of blameless ways are his delight. Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape. Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense. The desire of the righteous ends only in good; the expectation of the wicked in wrath. Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water. The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it. Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor, but evil comes to the one who searches for it. Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves. Those who trouble their households will inherit wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away." Proverbs 11:16-30, NRSV.