

The Road Less Travelled

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Theologian Walter Wink begins his wonderful reflection upon principalities and powers with this statement: “Human evolution has provided the species with two deeply instinctual responses to violence: fight or flight. The way of Jesus, however offers a third way: nonviolent direct action.”

We find out early that human beings have been biologically, adaptively hard-wired to respond to external threats in two main ways: fight or flight.

In the beloved story that we know as the Good Samaritan, the man journeying down the Jericho road that day espying the man who was wounded by thieves and lying in a ditch had a couple of alternatives available to him. He could flee the scene, just as the busy priest and the pious layperson had done before him, “passing by on the other side.” Or he could double check his security. After all, the thieves who had robbed and beaten the poor man in the ditch could just as well be lying in wait for him.

Apparently, the Samaritan did neither. He chose a third alternative. He stopped and bandaged up the wounds of the stricken victim, put him on his own beast, took him to an inn, and provided for the long term care of the wounded man.

The story of the Good Samaritan, with its demonstration of an alternative way, reminds me of Jesus’ comments in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” 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 (Mt 5:38-44).

In saying, “You have heard it said,” it’s like Jesus is saying, “Everybody knows that . . . ” Everybody knows it’s only natural that when wrong is done to you, you attempt to defend yourself and return evil for evil. When you come across injustice, as the Good Samaritan did that day on his way down the Jericho road, you either pick up your pace and get out of there or else you draw your weapon and attempt to get the evildoers before they have a chance to get you.

The Hebrew Scriptures as traditionally interpreted have enforced a similar view of God and God’s interaction with the world. The Christian church and, in particular, some denominations of the faith often present that distorted perception of God.

Take as an example the reading from Amos this morning. We have a picture of God standing with a plumb line and if the people don’t measure up, if they stray to the left or the right of the plumb line, “the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (Amos 7:9). Somehow this is the image of God that a lot of people have, a judge sitting on high and meting out punishment when we fail to measure up. Are we projecting our own biological tendency toward fight or flight on God?

Well, in the story of the Good Samaritan Jesus says there is the possibility of a third way. The Samaritan did not respond in either of the two common ways of fight or flight. He responded with risky, engaged compassion. And Jesus says, “Go; you do the same.”

Last week I shared a story from Will Willimon’s youth with a neighbourhood bully, well here is another Willimon story from a few years later:

“Johnny Singer hated me. He was a year older, a lot bigger, and much meaner. When his girlfriend broke up with him, for some strange reason known only to him I got the blame. I couldn’t

figure out any way to change his mind, so I just made it my business to avoid him. Because he and I lived in different parts of town, that was fairly easily done.

Then one day the retributive blow came. I was waiting in line with my meek and mild friends for the movie to open – a grand *Tarzan* feature – when from out of nowhere there came this horrible, excruciating blow to my left arm.

I quickly in that moment considered my options. One, run like a crazy man and get out of there fast. I figured, in my painful state, I could make it all the way down the block without Johnny nabbing me. Two, I could risk a fight and try to take him down, just like I had done to a couple of others on the school ground. But Johnny seemed to tower over me as he scowled at me, daring me to give him a good excuse to deck me right then and there. Or was there possibly a third option? Maybe something I could say would give him the means to just work this problem out between us. Fear encouraged me to cut and run. My pride urged me to make a stand, face him down, get in the best blow, and fight it out. But something inside me seemed to lean toward a third option.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus puts forth a third way to respond to injustice perpetrated against us. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is one of the oldest laws on the books. It is found in the Code of Hammurabi, which dates all the way back to the 18th century bce. *Lex talionis* literally means “law of retaliation.” The intent was to limit the retaliation a person could inflict on the one who perpetrated a violent act. If someone puts out your eye, you can’t kill that person; all you can do to retaliate is to put out their eye.

Building on the Code of Hammurabi, the Mosaic Law says, “Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered” (Lev 24:19-20). And, “Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deut 19:21).

You will note that our criminal justice system operates largely on this code of retribution. Victims are not urged just to flee, to walk away; they are urged to get even, to seek legal retribution. Make the punishment fit the crime. In extreme cases, in some countries and until the 1960's in Canada, if you take someone's life you are given the death penalty, a life for a life.

There are problems with this alternative. For one thing, retribution never seems to give victims enough retribution. Time and again after capital punishment, the victim's family says they aren't satisfied, they don't have closure. The perpetrator has been put to death, but that death doesn't even the score or make up for the death of their loved one. Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."

But then Jesus comes along with a decidedly third way: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). He backs it up with concrete examples: turn the other cheek, give them your cloak, go the second mile. These texts are familiar enough: take undeserved punishment, be generous in adversity, and sacrificially go the distance.

The Samaritan didn't even know the victim who lay dying. He could have done what the priest and the layman did – just pass by on the other side. That is, he could have fled – option one. Or he could have drawn his sword, taken his stand, and attempted to track down the attackers and avenge what they did to the poor man – option two. Instead the Samaritan chose a third way – option three, the way commanded by Jesus.

Back to Willimon's story: "When Johnny slugged me that day in front of the Fox Theater, it was a moment of truth for me. Do I clench my fist and give him a dose of what he had so unjustly given me? Do I run away and hope that I can avoid ever seeing Johnny again for the rest of my life? For some reason I chose the third option. I stood there, in front of the gaze of all the other kids in the line and said, despite my fears, "Hey look, Johnny, of course you could beat me up. You are bigger and

better at fighting than I'll ever hope to be. But why?" Then I slowly and deliberately turned and walked away, calmly turning around and joining my buddies in the line. I'm sure they expected Johnny to curse me and to jump on me at that point, maybe jumping on them in the process, beating us all to a pulp.

But he didn't. I'll always be thankful that he didn't, not only because it would have been very painful for me, and embarrassing too, but also because that day I got to see a better side of Johnny than I had ever seen before. I won't say that day that we became best of friends, but that day at least Johnny stopped being my worst enemy. Maybe that day Johnny even saw a better side of himself than he had ever seen before.

More than that, I got to see a different side of how the way of Jesus works. In fact, this morning you might take that as a definition of the Christian life. A Christian is someone who dares to follow Jesus down a third way."

The way of the world is the way of violence, the way that put the poor man into the ditch and stripped him of all his earthly goods: fight. Then there is the cowardly way: flee. Then there is the way of Jesus, a new way, in the words of M. Scott Peck, *A Road Less Travelled* and this is to stop, reach out in compassion and restoration, risk responding not with violence or in cowardice but in daring to love.

The Samaritan dared. He refused to let the violent robbers define the situation. He didn't just stop; he extravagantly took charge of the situation, bound up the man's wounds, made arrangements for the man's long-term restoration, and thus redeemed an ugly situation.

Today, says Jesus "Go and do likewise." Thanks be to God. Amen.