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by Mary M. McGlone

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Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

[February 23, 2020](#)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

Psalms 103

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

Turn the other cheek to a bully; give all you have to those who don't need it; walk the extra mile by submitting to callous, unjust law enforcement. Those injunctions, especially when heard at the end of Black History Month, sound like they come straight out of the slave overseers' catechism. They assure the dominance of the strong and the subservience of the weak. That makes them applicable across the centuries and in just about every culture as the tenets of tyrants.

Did Jesus mean it? How does this jibe with the Leviticus command to be holy like God? Does a holy person bow down before evil?

Last week, we had to interpret Jesus' words about anger, name-calling and making peace. Now we need to figure out what today's teaching meant in its original context and apply it to our own.

Most people probably imagine Jesus delivering this advice to his disciples in a most solemn fashion. We might picture them hanging their heads, saying, "If only he had demanded that we fast, say 40 decades of the rosary, or give up watching football for a month. ... But this is unrealistic!"

Historical study might lead us to picture this teaching as something more appropriate to an Irish pub than an Episcopal cathedral. Suppose we listen to this as if we thought Jesus was joking? Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't take this seriously. We need to take it with the utmost seriousness, but not literally, as if Jesus' times were just like ours.

Remember, Jesus was talking to rough-and-tumble folks who often had trouble with the authorities. Try a little experiment. Figure out how to strike someone on the *right* cheek. In a right-handed world, the only way for most to do that is backhanded. A backhanded blow delivers more insult than injury. You would never backhand a superior, or even an equal. The very act of doing it is a proclamation of supremacy — usually accompanied by an expectation of impunity.

The person who turns the other cheek throws the bully off guard by negating the insult. The person who turns the other cheek proclaims, "I am more than you think I am." People who turn the other cheek are asserting their own dignity and subversively challenging despots to become more human.

Jesus' other two examples get their meaning from historical context. Going to law over a tunic refers to a situation of extreme poverty in which a pauper needs to borrow and has only his coat to offer as collateral. Exodus 22:25 demands that the lender return the coat at night because it is also the pauper's blanket. But if the lender thinks the borrower is taking advantage of the situation to avoid paying his debts, he can arrange a trial to teach the poor a lesson and keep the cloak.

The borrower's only recourse is prophetic action: stripping himself in public to demonstrate how legalism denudes poor people of every protection.

The "extra mile" depicts the real comic scene. Jesus' audience knew that Roman soldiers could force someone to carry their packs for precisely 1 mile and no more. When the carrier went further, the astounded soldier, suddenly in danger of being charged with brutality or worse, had to chase after the cheerful carrier, begging for the return of his burden. What a silly comedown for the pompous!

Now, back to the first reading. We've gotta love the keen insight of the Leviticus writer who tells us "cherish no grudge." How often do our grudges feed our egos, making us feel righteous and innocently victimized at the same time?

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One of our sisters described what it means to cherish a grudge, saying, "Some people go through life pressing their bruises. No injury will go unforgotten, no insult be left unfestering in the offended heart."

People who move through life like this may be missing a great career in accounting; they have the ability to keep track of every cent and mill (that's one-tenth of a penny).

Leviticus said, "Be holy." Jesus said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus portrayed this "perfection" as the creative power to transform situations of injustice. He must have had to think and pray a long time to come up with these examples. We need to do the same.

The Gospel of nonviolent resistance is very serious — and humorous to boot. This Gospel calls us to cherish our adversaries more than we cherish our grudges. We do that through the intimately related activities of not letting anyone get away with denigrating others, and creating alternatives that express reverence for the dignity of everybody involved. We need long thought and prayer to become creative, transformative, holy images of our God.

With luck, we'll have lots of fun along the way!

[St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone is currently serving on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.]

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