

How can we say that Christianity is for peace when so much violence has been committed in the name of Christianity?¹

Matthew 5: 43-48

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

February 27, 2011

None of the questions in this sermon series is easy or conducive to simple answers. Final, complete answers are hard to come by. So here is today's question: How can we say that Christianity is for peace when so much violence has been committed in the name of Christianity?

I

According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.* It gets even more baffling: he also reversed the ancient law that said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." Instead, he said, *Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.*

What do we make of this? Are Christians supposed to be doormats for any bully to walk over? Is this a call for Christian wimps? And what about the long history of war and violence in the name of Christ? Can we really say that the brutality of the Crusades, the burning of so-called heretics, the cruelty to

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, February 27, 2011.

indigenous people, the subjugation of women, and the horrors of slavery have anything to do with the teaching of Jesus?

The first thing to point out is that war and violence are not just Christian problems; they are human problems. War seems to be humanity's incurable disease. Long before Christianity, Plato said, "Only the dead have seen an end to war." Maybe he was right. The grand words from Isaiah inscribed on the wall outside the United Nations building seem to be along way off: *And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*²

Even the Bible is ambivalent on this. The third chapter of the prophet Joel seems to reverse Isaiah's statement: it proclaims a time *to beat ploughshares into swords, pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a warrior."*³ At one point we hear Jesus say, *Love your enemies*, and at another point we hear him say, *Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*⁴ If you are confused by all this ambiguity, then you are in good company.

² Isaiah 2: 4.

³ Joel 3: 10.

⁴ Matthew 10: 34.

Some among us are committed pacifists; some among us are what we might call “selective pacifists;” and some among us are enthusiastic nationalists, ready to use the military as the first line of defense. While we may say that force is sometimes necessary, what is wrong—always wrong—is delight in using it. Albert Camus spoke of going forward with “weapons in our hands and a lump in our throats.”⁵

II

Reading the Sermon on the Mount is perhaps one of the best ways to unpack this important question. It is worth pausing to ask, “What exactly did he mean when he spoke of turning the other cheek?”

Many people mistakenly take it to mean that he was teaching absolute non-resistance. If someone hits you on one cheek, turn the other also and let that person batter you some more. This understanding has had tragic consequences for many women who have been taught in church that they have to “turn the other cheek” when their husband hits them. Too many people have assumed that to turn the other cheek means that Christians are supposed to be doormats or wimps, and never stand up to bullies.

⁵ Quoted by William Sloan Coffin, *My Heart is a Little to the Left* (University Press of New England, 1999), p. 60.

But look at Jesus! Was he a doormat? Was he a wimp? Did he let evil run roughshod over him? The truth is that he resisted evil with every fiber of his being! When he said “Do not resist an evildoer...,” the word translated “resist” is *antistenai*, which literally means “stand against,” and was a technical term for warfare. Jesus was saying, “Don’t go to war with an evildoer with the same weapons.”

If my opponent has a pistol and I only have my fist, my first impulse would be to go get a pistol. But then my opponent goes and gets a machine gun, so I feel the necessity of getting a machine gun. He then gets a tank, and I must do the same. Eventually he gets an atomic bomb, and we feel the need of getting an atomic bomb. Jesus is saying, “Don’t turn into the very thing you hate. Don’t participate in that unending cycle of violence.”

As an example, he uses the illustration of someone striking you on the right cheek. Imagine that your assailant were to strike a blow with his right fist; which cheek would it land on? It would be your left cheek. So that is not what Jesus is talking about here. He says, *If anyone strikes you on the RIGHT cheek, turn the other also.* Of course, someone could strike you on the right cheek if he used a left hook, but that would never happen in that culture. The left hand was used only for unclean tasks. Custom would not allow even a

gesture with your left hand in public. The only way your assailant could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

The back of the hand was not a blow to injure; it was a symbolic blow. It was intended to put you in your place. It was intended to humiliate a person, to degrade a person. It was used by an arrogant master on a slave. It was used by the powerful over the powerless. A Roman soldier might use it to remind a Jew of his place in the social stratum of that age. What Jesus was saying was in effect, “When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down and insult you, then turn the other cheek.”

By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying, “I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being like you. I am a child of God. You cannot put me down even if you have me killed. I am somebody.” We actually do this naturally. If we feel humiliated and belittled, we tend to tuck our chin downward. But if we feel confident and determined, ready to stand up and be counted, we lift our faces upward with our chin out! That takes a lot of courage, but if enough people stand up non-violently to do that, even the most brutal dictator can be subdued. There may be a heavy price to be paid, but the masses of people have stood up and said, “We are somebody!”

What Jesus was saying here is that we can live in this world in a way that stands up to evil without becoming evil ourselves. The choice is not

between becoming evil ourselves or becoming a doormat that allows evil to walk all over us. There is a way of resisting evil that is non-violent. He is NOT calling on people to be non-resistant; he is calling on people to be non-violent!

III

In trying to answer this provocative question about violence in the name of Christianity, it is also worth recognizing that it is very hard to imagine how big is our God. What God is big enough to love the whole world? We like to think our God is not big enough to love Muslim people or anyone we might consider a threat.

Look at another saying of Jesus. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus says, *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight.*⁶ In those days rich people brought large animals to the temple for sacrifice, but poor people could not afford such an animal. Therefore the law provided that they could buy a sparrow for sacrifice. Sparrows sold for two for a penny, and if you bought two pennies' worth, a fifth sparrow was thrown in.

Jesus was saying that God even cares for that fifth sparrow, the one thrown in for free! Jesus was using that fifth sparrow as an illustration of the unbounded, unfathomable love of God. He was saying that God loves every

⁶ Luke 12: 6.

human being on earth from the Pope to the wino. He was saying that even those considered worthless are of inestimable value to our God.

It is doubtless true that much violence has been perpetrated in the name of Christ. But it is also true that many others have come to realize how big our God is, and in the name of Christ have worked for the good of even those considered enemies. Loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you is not sentimental weakness; it is realistic strength, for the biblical term “loving” has to do with wishing for and working for the good of another.

It is not simply allowing evil to run roughshod over you; rather, it is doing exactly what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount and what the Apostle Paul would later say to the church in Rome: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*⁷

IV

I certainly cannot give a final, definitive answer to the question of why so much violence has been perpetrated in the name of Christ. We are human, and God has given us an amazing freedom of choice. Sometimes we might find ourselves wishing that God didn't give humanity such freedom. But if love is the name of the game, then absolute freedom is a precondition.

⁷ Romans 12: 21.

And if we are free to be violent, we are also free to be non-violent. We can choose to be peacemakers. As we will sing at the close of this service, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."