

David Goff
Unstriking the Blow
I John 4:7-21
December 28, 2008

A few days ago we celebrated again the birth of the baby Jesus, the entrance to earth of a new and a sacred life, and a light in whose warmth would many later find solace. It is a yearly festivity, but because the cycle occurs yearly, already at the beginning we know the end of his story. Even now, as we remember how he was born, we cannot but remember how he died. As we sing how Mary's eyes shone at the swaddled babe, we know too well how they would later weep at the broken man. And yet we by no means mourn the birth of that child; we do not say, *Woe to him who would suffer so greatly, woe to him that he was born at all*. No, we celebrate that birth, for though hardships would follow for him, it is in those hardships that glows the beauty of his life. It is in those hardships that he lays forth his greatest examples. To believe in Christ is, in part, to believe that peace can prevail simply by being peaceful; that it is endurance, and not rebellion, that will overthrow injustice. It is believing that a man, Jesus Christ, won a battle not by rising against, but by submitting to and dying at the blows of his enemy. And it's a good story to remember. It's a nice, an inspiring story to remind each other of year after year. But what does it mean, in this world of genocides, of torture and battery, where even those who rise up are often cast down, and those who merely submit are plowed and forgotten? What does it mean that Christ suffered and died for our sins when sin seems still to infect the earth's every cavity, and mankind's deepest crevice? One may well ask whether Christianity can truly survive in this or any age, when not to rise up, not to strike, not to resist is a serious handicap; when merely to love means

to sacrifice one's all to those unashamed to take it. Without armies, without punitive laws and castigation, there are, of course, those who will take advantage. Without force, there are those who will not submit to peace. And of course: We don't want that! So some may say, *Because there are those who do not know peace, those who do not know how to love, I can't afford to let myself be only peaceful, only loving. I can't afford not to combat their forcefulness with forcefulness. Their very inability to care renders me unwilling. Their unlove negates my love. Christ may have turned his cheek, but what do I do when kids are stashing razorblades in the locker next to my own child's? What do I do when the ill-willed hide outside the light of the streetlamps and wait for me to turn my back? May not then the hand of judgment fall, and yet strike with righteousness? May not then the shield of justice deflect that hatred back upon them who first bore it? Do those who have no love, who have no charity, truly deserve my own?* It is no easy question. And it is one with which many have grappled.

Dostoyevsky addresses it in part in his *The Brothers Karamazov*. In it an abbot and Christian mystic named Father Zossima lies on his deathbed. He has been mortally sick, and lies there still alive only because he has yet some things more to tell those who stand around him, listening. He says, *At some thoughts one stands perplexed, especially at the sight of men's sin, and wonders whether one should use force or humble love. Always decide to use humble love. If you resolve on that once and for all, you may subdue the whole world...For we must love not only occasionally, for a moment, but forever. Everyone can love occasionally, even the wicked can.*

But such words are no salve for the bodily pain, the emotional trauma which victims of crime and anger must daily endure; and one cannot but wonder whether one must—whether one can—love so unconditionally, resort always to humble love, and never once to physical force. Indeed some may well say that the law of life preaches the use of righteous force, kill or be killed, eat or be eaten—the lioness and the antelope clawing and kicking across the Kalahari; the eagle on her aerie guarding watchfully her nestlings—she whose talons would fly, remorseless, to spill the preying jackal’s blood. From their example may we not duly justify our own conduct? May we, too, not strike that which threatens us? Yet perhaps we are focusing on the wrong things in their example. The law of life is not one of destruction; the law of life holds above all else that life may live, and be lived. The creed is one of self-sustenance—separate and varied creatures sustain one another, and through each other sustain the great life. If there is a forcefulness therein, it is one not of malice but of preservation; it is a violence not of judgment, but of necessity. What becomes troublesome for us, then, is when we confuse our judgment, our intolerance, our malice—when we confuse that with necessity.

Murderers must be killed because they threaten our lives and livelihood. Dictators must be destroyed because they threaten democracy. Democracies must be destroyed because they threaten dictators. Foreigners must be left to die because they threaten the natives. In this world we’ve created, we subsist not only on physical nourishment, but also on ideas, on relationships, on projects, materials, and feelings, and a threat to any one of these we might regard as severely as a threat to our own bodily health. In this world of things and ownership some people might condemn

the Thief as harshly as the Murderer, the Vandal as harshly as the Thief, the Literary Critic as harshly as the Vandal. It is a complicated situation indeed when the antelope feels the need to defend his grass, his gait, his water and walking-routes as staunchly as he would his own hide. We are indeed such antelope. And even the most loving of us, who seeks much more than the lioness to preserve the sacred life force—even he must find it difficult not to use force on occasion, when everywhere he turns some feature on some level of his many-layered existence is threatened, denounced, belittled.

And then there are those who love little more than the very breath that fills them, little more than the wine in their bellies and the blankets round their shoulders, who love this world and its plenty only insofar as they themselves may conquer and consume it. And yet though their love be small, one cannot say of them that they do not love. And one cannot say that they do not deserve love. There are some of our race who will kill for their god, for their child, for the yearly harvest. And there are some who will kill for taxes, for treasures, for reputation, for curiosity. Yet even then one cannot say that their hearts are barren; for indeed the problem is not that they do not know love, but that they do not know the consequences of a love unwhole, a love incomplete, a love whose object is far too narrow, too specific. A porous bowl holds little more water than no bowl at all; is, then, a heart that is not all-embracing sufficient for those noble ends we say we seek? Far too often is it easy to say, *I love all—all but for the rapist and the bigot, the one who hides bombs in trashcans, who puts kittens in the microwave. Such as they are beyond and below human compassion. From such as them is my own love exempt; in just these few cases,*

it's different. And from there it is that much easier to say, I love all—all but for the one who raided my bank account, the one who threw rocks at my car, the one who ran the red light, the one who talked too loudly at the theater. I love all—but I do not love you.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, *Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Love is not arrogant—it does not sit and scowl, and think to itself, *I would strike you, but I am above that. I will not dirty my conscience by striking such as you.* No, love endures—it does not seek to compensate its own lost blood with the blood of others; most of the time their blood types aren't compatible anyway. This of course does not mean that one must seek out adversity in order to love; one need not lie down on the railroad tracks merely to let the train feel his bones. But rather one need place one's charity above one's judgment, one's empathy above manners, mores, even morals. Love loves without pride. Love loves without resentment. In the Garden at his arrest, Christ sheathed Peter's sword and undid the harm it had done—Peter, the Rock, who would have stricken down every one of the Roman aggressors, they who threatened the very life of his master and teacher, and friend. At Christ's command his followers may well have staged a substantial uprising, and, like the Roman slave Spartacus just one hundred years before, have sent shockwaves across the empire. Who knows whether, if he had tried, Christ might even have made some small victories against the Roman hordes, and won a community of his own where he could rule and guide in peace. And yet, in the Garden, even while the taste of

betrayal lingered on his lips, and the road to Golgotha was unveiled before him, he kept the swords sheathed. With Death upon him he did not strike. It was not for him to judge the sins of men. How much less, then, for each of us. There are times (far too many) when we feel compelled to invoke that spirit of Spartacus, when the pain is so biting and injustice so rampant that not to strike back would seem a crime, a vicious crime, to those poor ones who suffer. Much good has been done by striking back against the forces of oppression; many lives have been healed by destroying a few. And no doubt much more good will be done, for there will surely be more to strike back against. Yet all the while we maintain this other example, this example of restraint, of love without distinction; and though it may have found rare application in our mutual histories, yet it is that example toward which we continually aim, and it is that example on which this very meetinghouse stands. Therein is the faith that good examples are followed; therein is the faith that one can absorb and endure the world's great sins, and in so doing vanquish them—the faith that goodwill begets goodwill, and love begets love. It is the faith that he had. It is the faith that we seek.