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Bruised Cheeks and Sore Feet

Text: Matthew 5:38-42

If I were more bold and slightly stupid, I would argue with Jesus about this text. I am not bold enough or stupid enough to argue with Jesus, but I would like to “argue” this text with you!

This stance and posture *does* not, *cannot,* work in the USA in 2021.The world in which we live does not lend itself to this suggested subservience. We would be taken advantage of. We would be used and abused if we went around turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile. No, this is not doable. It is a fine theoretical construct. This is a noble ideal toward which one could move in a different era. But in the USA in 2021??? No!

This text dares us to think about three subjects that are so contemporary, it is frightening.

1. Rights- What are my rights? There is much talk of that these days. In light of these incidents in which men of color are being shot by law enforcement officers in a traffic stop scenario, I did some reading about my rights. I have already decided I am not getting out of my car if I am stopped by an officer. However, I researched this question: Do I have the right to remain in my car if an officer asks me to step out of my car? That answer is NO. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly held that officers may order the driver and any passengers to get out of the car until the traffic stop is over. [Maryland v. Wilson, 519 U.S 408 (1997)]. In this post-George Floyd’s death era, do I trust a law enforcement officer enough to step out of the car? Is this negotiable? To be clear, not all law enforcement officers are mean or corrupt or arrogant or violent. Most officers want to protect and serve. What are our rights when it comes to navigating this world in which we live? In this text, Jesus teaches that a disciple of Jesus subordinates her/his rights for the benefit, the good, the well-being, of the other. That *other* may very well be an enemy. Jesus teaches that His disciples must show they are His, by lovingly subordinating their rights when they could assert them. Verse 39 probably does not refer to a physical slap on the cheek. Rather, it refers to an insult, a backhanded comment. We have the right to respond, in kind, to such a thing. Jesus says His disciples don’t.
2. Retaliation- This is a great temptation. I want to get even. You hurt me and I will hurt you. You make things difficult for me and I will make things difficult for you. Jesus teaches that vengeance is not mine to exact. I am not to spend even one minute of my day, plotting revenge on an enemy. I am to leave that to God. Immediately following the statement of the *eye for an eye* principle, the book of Exodus contains these lines:

*If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of the tooth.* (Exodus 21:26-27). The *lex* (law) *talionis* (retaliation) is a law that puts a limit on retaliation. Otherwise, retaliation would be limitless. Men come from a village 5 miles away and rape two of our women. We go to their village, rape three women and burn down two houses. They come to our village, burn three down three houses and kill two men. We go to them, kill three men, and burn all their crops and so on. If there were no *lex talionis*, the basic urge to exact revenge would never end. The context of the teaching in Exodus and in Matthew 5 suggests that the goal is compensation, not retaliation. There is an economic impact when a servant loses an eye or tooth, and that economic burden is borne by the servant’s employer. The loss of the slave was the equivalent of the master having to pay damages. Again, there are limits.

1. Resistance- What form shall my resistance take? Non-violent, as in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis and Mahatma Gandhi? In this post-George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Duante Wright era, many are not wanting to be non-violent. They want to *violently* resist the powers that be. This text, however, has Jesus teaching that His disciples ought not resist an evil person. Really? I am to do nothing when an officer kneels on my neck or the neck of another? I am to simply “take it” when I am stopped for no apparent reason? Is that what Jesus is teaching? We are a Matthew 25 church. Are we to be so docile as to be perceived as weak, as we serve the community and the world? Are we a faith community that never fights back? Are we to allow the world to bruise our cheeks, metaphorically slapping us around? Then give them the other cheek also? (v.39) If I read this text correctly, I am to let people take my stuff... and I am not to resist (v.40). I am supposed to make my feet sore, walking an extra mile with “whoever” (v.41). I am, according to this text, to give to the borrower and not turn that borrower away. I’m not sure I can do this.

Jesus calls for an ethical stance that is radical. We have heard it said...but Jesus says to us.... There is the way the culture, the average person responds to life and its circumstances.... and then there is the Jesus way.

Christ calls us all to a different way of engaging and responding to that which befalls us.

The operative word in this text is *give.* In verse 39 we are to present or *give* the other cheek when we are insulted. In verse 40 we are to *give* the cloak. In verse 41 we are to *give* another mile to the one who compels us. In verse 42 we *give* to the one who wants to borrow.

To be a Jesus person, to be a Matthew 25 people, is to give assent to a life of giving and serving and loving. We open ourselves up to *insult* and our metaphorical cheeks to *assault.* We have sore feet from walking with the broken, the wounded, the ignored.

We are the people of the bruised cheek and the sore feet.

**Illus.**

In 1956, African Americans in the city of Montgomery, AL brought the city’s public system to its knees over the issue of its treatment of Black passengers. At the me there were approximately 50,000 African Americans in Montgomery. Most of them boycotted the buses for 382 days, using a well-designed transportation system consisting of private cars, church vans, taxis, bicycles, horse-drawn buggies, and walking.

One elderly woman said, "Since I been walking, my feet are tired, but my soul's rested."

That’s the church. Bruised cheeks, sore feet...but rested souls.

What a privilege!!!

Amen