

The Third Way

Luke 6:27-38

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 24) 2019

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During the summer of 1974 going into my senior year in high school, we got a new football coach. As a captain and the quarterback I met with him. He told me, “We’re going to change the way we play the game. Everyone in Texas high school football runs the ball and therefore teaches its defense how to defend against the run. We’re not going to do that. We’re going to throw the ball. High school teams are not prepared to stop the pass so we’re going to pass.”

So we began learning how to play the game differently. We practiced, practiced, practiced, how to block, how to pass, how to receive, and how to think in a different way. It was not so much about learning different rules, although there was some of that. It was about learning different techniques and how to stand, how to throw, and how to pass the football and catch it on timing instead of sight. This took practice, practice, practice until we could do it instinctively. I threw 100 passes a day over a bar to learn how to throw over charging linemen with their hands up in the air. It became instinctive. We ran sprints and ran and ran some more because we were going to be running up and down the field the entire game, all the time, full-speed. We practiced everything from footwork to how to hold the ball. We practiced a new way.

In today’s Scripture lesson, Jesus teaches a new way. Not a new way to play football but a new way to live, to be God’s people in a hurt-filled, violent, hard world. Jesus started teaching two chapters before back in chapter 4, announcing

not simply new rules but a new way of being, a new way of seeing, a new way of acting. Speaking in his hometown synagogue, Jesus said, “‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:18-19).

Now, with a crowd, along with his disciples, around him he begins to flesh out what this new way looks like. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again” (Luke 6: 27-30).

This is hard stuff! Love your enemies – you’ve got to be kidding Jesus! Do you know my enemies? Or, “Jesus, there’s some pretty bad enemies out there. Vicious, cruel, violent – and you’re wanting me to love them?” Yet loving enemies is at the heart of what Biblical scholars call Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, this shorter version found here in Luke 6, but containing some of the same teaching as the Sermon on the Mount found over in Matthew 5-6-7. Loving enemies is at the heart of the new way.

Theologian Miroslav Volf, who now teaches at Yale Divinity School, tells of delivering a lecture on loving and embracing enemies in the same way as God embraces us. It was the winter of 1993 in Germany, but it was also during the heart

of the Bosnian War, where in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia, notorious Serbian fighters, called “*četniks*” were sowing desolation, mass raping, burning down churches, and destroying entire cities in Miroslav Volf’s home country. Volf is Croatian. For him, the Serbian fighters, the *četniks* were the ultimate other, the ultimate enemy, and he had just delivered a lecture on loving your enemies. Volf said his professor, Jurgen Moltmann, stood up and asked one of his typical incisive questions, “But can you embrace a *četnik*?” Can you embrace the ultimate enemy? Can you embrace one whom you both hate and fear?

Volf eventually responded, “No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”

I think Volf expresses much our own dilemma, our own struggle with the Way of Jesus of loving enemies: we cannot do it but we know as followers of Jesus Christ we should. We struggle with what might that look like in our context. How do we learn to practice this kind of love? But aren’t we responsible for loving and protecting our children and grandchildren in the face of enemies? And what about protecting others?

Yesterday morning, Bob Choate facilitated a vigorous and good conversation among close to thirty of us about guns, safety, and church. It was candid, honest, and I think, helpful to Austin Heights being people of the New Way in Christ. But it was not easy. It was not simple. We talked about fear and talked about security. We talked about who we are and who we are called to be.

It was a conversation that will be ongoing. Which is the way a good congregation talks – and you are certainly a good congregation. We talk, we listen,

and we keep on talking and listening, discerning who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do.

The old rule for dealing with conflict and threat is that we respond with either fight or flight. We either turn and engage and do battle or we turn and avoid. Fight or flight.

But the Jesus way is the third way. Neither fight nor flight, Jesus shows us another option when dealing with conflict or threat. Our Anabaptist ancestors and our Mennonite cousins are the ones who first called this the Third Way.

Jesus teaches the Third Way when he says that we are to turn the other cheek and give up our shirt along with our coat. It's likely that Jesus is speaking here to those who were victims rather than victimizers, to those oppressed rather than their oppressors. He's talking to plain Jewish folks who have been exploited and abused by those in authority, especially Rome and those in cahoots with Rome. Jesus is neither telling these people to just roll over and let Rome step on them nor is he telling them to grab their sword and defend themselves with violence.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink helps us see how Jesus' teaches a Third Way, a way of creative non-violent resistance. Most of you recall this; we've talked about it before. In that place and time, a person's left hand was used for what was called "unclean acts." That meant you never did anything else with your left hand. You never ate with your left hand, you never shook hands with your left hand, and you never even struck a person with your left hand. A person considered superior to another person, would backhand an inferior person with their right hand. To hit open-handed meant the person you hit was a social equal. When Jesus says "turn the other cheek" it puts the oppressor in the awkward position of

needing to use an open-handed slap and therefore treating the so-called inferior person as a social equal. Suddenly and imaginatively the tables are turned.

Then Jesus says if anyone demands your coat do not withhold giving even your shirt. Jesus is talking to people who likely owed money to those with financial power and he is talking about debt repayment. The one demanding repayment, could take the very coat off your back and Jesus says give him your shirt also. Or give him even your undergarments. In that day and time, shame was a very big deal and the shame would be upon the one who sees you naked, not on the person who is naked. So Jesus sets up another creative strategy of resistance. If they ask for your coat, give them your shirt too. There you'll be standing naked; they'll be forced to deal with this new reality you've set up.

This creative Third Way is what my old teacher, Glen Stassen, called taking a "transforming initiative." It is creatively and imaginatively playing the game in a new way. It is saying, "Okay, we may have to play on the same field, but we're not going to sit back and wait. We're taking the initiative. And we're going to play in a new and creative way.

Matt Perry, for whom we will be voting on his becoming a deacon in a few minutes after the worship service, and Tori are both actors and theater teachers, and who have talked with me about improvisational theater. Actors immerse themselves in the script and in their character so it all becomes instinctive. Then they are handed a new scenario in which there is no script and they have to make it up as they go. They have to creatively improvise out of the script and character they've practiced, practiced, and practiced becoming. When the unknown comes, they know what to do.

That's the Christian life and that's the Jesus Way, the Third Way. Sam Wells, the rector of St. Martin in the Fields in London says that most of the Christian life is preparation for an unknown test (*Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, p. 79-80). We practice, practice, practice and we use God-given-Holy Spirit-inspired creativity to improvise transforming initiatives.

Austin Heights, we are having an ongoing conversation about how to respond to unknown situations and that will include tornadoes, fire, and health concerns, too. We practice, practice, practice the Third Way of Jesus; we immerse ourselves in the script (the Bible) and in prayer and worship and we think and prepare creatively and imaginatively about what to do. I personally do not know what we're going to do or how we going to do it about church safety and guns or any number of other concerns. All I can do is help you practice the Third Way. Together as a congregation we will discern what that looks like here, now.

Six years ago in August, 20 year-old Michael Hill slipped through the door of McNair Discovery Learning Center Elementary School in Decatur, GA, on the heels of someone else. Michael Hill was carrying an AK-47 and over 500 rounds of ammunition. He confronted the front office personnel, fired some shots into the floor and told the clerk he had nothing to live for.

The clerk, Antoinette Tuff showed unusual resilience, creativity, and compassion in dealing with Michael Hill. She kept talking to Hill, engaging him and eventually speaking to him about his troubles, her own troubles, and most importantly, she calmed him down and told him she loved him, at first calling him "sir" and then calling him "baby." "Don't feel bad, baby," she told him. "It's going to be all right, baby."

She later said that she relied on her pastor's recent sermons about showing compassion to people in grief. She told Hill about her own struggles to raise her two children, including her son, who is legally blind and hearing impaired, and struggling to deal with her divorce the previous year after 33 years of marriage.

"You know I tried to commit suicide last year after my husband left me? But look at me now," Tuff told Hill. "I'm still working and everything is OK."

When Hill agreed to surrender to police, Tuff told him where to put his gun and ammunition, but reassured him that he will be OK.

"I want you to know I love you and I'm proud of you," she said. "It's a good thing you're just giving up. Don't worry about it. We all go through something in life."

She recalled that her mind raced with thoughts of her own two children and of the 800 young students and staff whose lives depended on her. She also said that at a certain point she realized that Hill was "a hurting young man" and felt sorry for him and began to pray for him.

"I knew that if he got out of the door that he was going to kill everybody. He said he had no reason to live and that nobody loved him and I explained to him that I loved him," she said. "I didn't know his name, but I loved him."

Now am I saying that everything always turns out for the better? No. But I'm also reminding you that everything does not always turn out for the bad.

In *Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf the wise wizard says, "Other evils there are that may come... Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the [comfort] of those years wherein we are set... What weather

they shall have is not ours to rule” (*The Return of the King*, chapter 9 “The Last Debate,” p. 155). In other words, we cannot control everything. Our job is to play our part.

One last thing – I remind you that earlier Luke tells us at the beginning of this Sermon on the Plain, “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him [Jesus], for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Luke 6:19).

When we play our part, when we practice, practice, practice the Third Way we do not hunker down behind our walls in fear. Power goes outward from Jesus. In John 20, after Jesus has been killed the disciples are hunkered down behind locked doors in fear of the authorities. And the resurrected Jesus shows up. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit, empowering them to go out and live the Third Way.

That’s our calling. To not be afraid but be empowered by the Spirit of the Living Christ and go out that door creatively and boldly live the Third Way of Jesus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.