

Enemy Love
Don Lincoln
Matthew 5:38-48

On February 2nd, a group of pastors called “The Fellowship” sent a letter to the Presbyterian Church at large inviting others to sign on. The letter characterized the Presbyterian Church as constantly engaged in rancorous debate over sexuality and biblical interpretation; a denomination in steady decline for 45 years; and a Christian body that is deathly ill.¹

The letter suggests it is time for a new way of thinking; to focus on nurturing leaders; fostering effective denominational structures; and multiplying healthy, missional congregations. While I agree with the statements about leaders, structures, and healthy congregations, I did not sign the letter.

I didn’t sign, in part, because the letter then proposed not a new way, but an old way of thinking. They extend an invitation to “**like-minded**” thinkers to attend a meeting in August. I don’t believe the invitation is for me, because I am not “like minded” about all their views of the PC(USA). At the core, I don’t think the denomination can be generalized as deathly ill – at least any more deathly ill than it has been at any other time, as a human institution only imperfectly reflecting all Jesus calls us to do and be.

In conversation with Bob Young, my predecessor here at Westminster, Bob commented it appears this group is looking for a purity in American Presbyterianism that has never existed. Indeed – take a snapshot from any period in our denomination’s life – or any denomination – and it is unlikely you’ll find a time with no rancorous debate – over slavery, or civil rights, or predestination, Catholicism, Vietnam, women in ministry, organized labor, or – well you get the picture.

In my estimation, the letter’s invitation to “like minded” thinkers is the same OLD way of thinking. Let’s rally OUR SIDE – OUR COHORTS – draw the line in the sand – my way or the highway; our way or no way. And that is a way of thinking as old as the hills – a way I desire NOT to be like-minded.

It didn’t help that the Steering Committee of seven pastors who drafted the letter was made up entirely of white male pastors of large churches, the majority of them over the age of 50. (NOT that there is, mind you, anything inherently wrong with white male pastors of large churches over 50!).

The letter released a flood of reactions and responses. Many quickly noted that “like-minded” didn’t include any women – or pastors of small congregations – and in this age of Facebook, blogs and emails, the conversation picked up a head of steam. But many responses themselves are like minded – choosing sides; picking battles; drawing lines in the sand.

That is, until this past Wednesday, when I found myself in a conversation with a young pastor and good friend who with others is drafting a proposal to the letter writers. They suggest inviting another group to co-convene their August meeting. They suggest names of seven more people for the leadership roster who are not all male, not all pastors of large churches, not all of the same ethnic background, not all like-minded about the thorny issues facing Christians in the 21st century, and the majority of them under the age of 40.

The reasoning? Not only would it broaden the voices in the dialogue, it would, as they propose, “Represent the next generation of church leaders, who will inherit whatever it is you will leave behind in your wake.”

I love the creative spirit unleashed in their proposal approach. I love the way in which it calls out “like-mindedness” as an age-old way of thinking – which tends toward the narrow, the rigid, uncreative, wall building, and not forward looking. Their proposal is invitational – not confrontational. It resists the same old direction the letter proposes – and creatively suggests a way to transform the very foundation of the dialogue, and that is powerful.

Not unlike the commendation of Jesus in our passage today. He reminds His listeners of the oldest law in the world – a widely understood and agreed upon way of thinking. “You have heard it said “an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.” Lex Talionis is the name of this law. It appears in the earliest known code of laws, the Code of Hammurabi, who reigned in Babylon in 2285 B.C.

Now to our ears, eye for an eye sounds blood thirsty and savage. But Lex Talionis – the law of tit for tat – is the beginning of mercy. Its aim was the limitation of vengeance. In earlier days, blood feud and vendetta were characteristic of tribal society. If a man of one tribe injured a man of another tribe, then the members of the tribe of the injured man set out to take vengeance on members of the tribe of the man who committed the injury; and vengeance often meant wiping out a whole village.²

Lex Talionis deliberately limits vengeance. It requires only the man who committed the injury be punished, and his punishment must be equivalent to the injury inflicted and damage done. Seen in its historical setting this is not a savage law, but a law far more merciful than unbridled vengeance.

But Jesus invites His listeners and us to a new way of thinking. “But I say to you, turn the other cheek; give also your cloak; go the second mile.” Biblical scholar Walter Wink, in his book “Jesus and Nonviolence – A Third Way” explains his sense of the historical context and the power of Jesus’ suggestions.³

In a right-handed society, where the left hand was used only for unclean tasks, the only way to strike the right cheek was with the back of the right hand. The intention was not to injure, but to humiliate. You would not strike a peer in this way. This was admonishment to an inferior – master over slave; parent over child; Roman over Jew. For the inferior one, striking back was suicidal. Submission was expected.

But Jesus suggests a new way to the subordinate. Offer the other side of the face that can only be struck with the right hand, as if one were an equal. This reduces the oppressor to regarding this subordinate as an equal human being, worthy of an honest fight. This response is one of defiance – nonviolent, for sure – but creatively game-changing. “I won’t accept your insult. If you will have a go at me, it will be as equals.”

Okay. Maybe customs about left hands and right cheeks is confusing, Jesus’ next example may be easier. “If anyone wants to sue you for your coat, give him your cloak as well.” Indebtedness was a serious social problem in Palestine. Jesus’ parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. But who puts up their outer garment as collateral for a loan? Only the poorest of the poor. There were plenty of them, thanks to corrupt Roman imperialism.

Jesus’ counsel to one who has nothing left but the shirt on his back? Give him your shirt too! Walk out of court naked; leave your creditor standing with your coat in one hand, your underwear in the other. Nakedness was taboo in Judaism. Shame fell not on the one who was naked, but the one who causes or views the nakedness. Humiliation belongs to the one who has left you with nothing but your birthday suit. “Is that what we’ve come to,” the action asks? A game changing response to an unjust system.

In a 2008 documentary "Praying the Devil Back To Hell," the Christian and Muslim women of Liberia formed an alliance of prayer to stop the civil war in their country. Every day they would gather at the presidential palace to pray for peace. Eventually the country’s factions met in neighboring Ghana for peace talks. After weeks of talks going nowhere, the women sat in the halls in front of the doors, locking the "men" in until peace was reached.

When faced with forced eviction, the women threatened to remove the only thing they had left, their clothes. The men, shamed at the thought of seeing their "mothers" naked, signed a peace treaty. The documentary was made of spliced together home videos, because the local news never thought a bunch of silly old

women could change anything and didn't cover it. But it worked – the power of a new way of thinking.⁴

Today we celebrate Habitat for Humanity. In the old way of thinking, the only way to own a home was to make enough money to save up a down payment, qualify for a loan, and buy a house. And while that may generally be a good system, and sensible for most people, it does not offer much hope to the working poor who could benefit from owning a home, but can't quite cross that last hurdle. Along comes Habitat with a new way of thinking: we will leverage the resources of others – to make the possibility of home ownership a reality for those who might never otherwise qualify for a mortgage, interest free loans, down payments paid with sweat equity, and walls and windows and roofs and floors installed by others in the community – neighbors! That's NEW THINK!

Enemy love means bringing creative energy to the conflict; the injustice; the issue at hand. Refusing to stand across the line and return fist for fist; angry word for angry word. It means finding a different way, another way, calling to the best of humanity in both parties, that all will profit. No more old think.

There was an unusual football game in North Texas last season. It was between Grapevine Faith Academy, a Dallas area Christian high school, and Gainesville State...a **correctional facility** high school 75 miles away.

Faith Academy was 7 and 2. They had 70 players, 11 coaches, and the latest equipment. Gainesville State's record was 0 and 8; their 14 players have used equipment, and of course.....they play every game on the road. Their team members are teenagers convicted of crimes ranging from drugs to assault to robbery. Many have families who have given up on them.

Chris Hogan, coach at Faith, knew the they would probably whip the Gainesville team, but on top of that, they would have no fans, so he thought: "What if half our fans and cheerleaders, for one night, cheered for the other team?" He emailed the Faith-ful asking them to do just that. Some folks thought he was nuts. One player said, "Coach, why are we doing this?"

Hogan said, "Imagine you don't have a home life, no one to love you, no one pulling for you. Imagine everyone pretty much had given up on you. Now, imagine hundreds of people suddenly believe in you."

Imagine the surprise of those 14 players when they took the field and there was a banner the cheerleaders had made for them to crash through. They had cheerleaders leading cheers for them and the visitor's bleachers were full of fans calling them by name.

Isaiah, the quarterback from the Gainesville team, said, "I never in my life thought I would hear parents cheering us to tackle their kids. Most of the time, when we come on the field, people are afraid of us. You can see it in their eyes, but these people are cheering for us. They knew our names."

Even though Faith beat them 33-14, the Gainesville kids were so happy that after the game they gave their coach the first Gatorade bath in history for an 0-9 coach.

The teams then gathered at the 50-yard line to pray. That's when Isaiah, the teenage convict-quarterback surprised everybody and asked if he could pray. He prayed, "Lord, I don't know what just happened, so I don't know how or who to say thank you to, but I never knew so many people in the world cared about us."

On the way back to the bus under guard, each one of the players was handed a burger, fries, a coke, a Bible, and an encouraging letter from the players from Faith Academy.⁵ That's game changing. New think.

That's what Jesus is calling us to. A new way. But note, here Jesus is offering descriptions, not prescriptions. Examples; not laws. Clearly, turning the other cheek won't work for an abused woman.

What Jesus is offering is the seeking of a new and creative way of thinking in the face of injustice and anger and enemy making. And each situation calls for all the creative energy and thoughtfulness God has given us to use. Creatively dismantling age old customs of eye for an eye; tit for tat.

Gandhi; Martin Luther King Jr., Millard Fuller of Habitat; the Christian and Muslim women of Liberia; the non-violent crowds in Egypt – seem to have caught on. Because in God's world, your enemy is still your neighbor – and in Jesus' way of thinking, neighbor trumps all.

We are in this together. In the face of injustice, conflict, disagreement, or uncertainty, is there another way? A third way that steps around lines in the sand – the age old my side/your side, tit-for-tat approach to every conflict, every injustice – and uses the creative mind and spirit God gave us to consider – we really are ALL in this thing called human life together. Is there another way we can work for justice and health and peace for all?

And that is not about my way, or your way, but our way – a third way that moves us all forward toward the common humanity God desires for all God's children? May it be so. AMEN.

1. Text of the letter can be found at:
[http://www.cpconline.org/uploaded_files/A%20Letter%20to%20the%20PCUS
A%20February%202011-final.pdf](http://www.cpconline.org/uploaded_files/A%20Letter%20to%20the%20PCUS%20February%202011-final.pdf)
2. Sil Galvin, "Justice or Forgiveness", Preaching the Common Lectionary, [prcl-
l@listserve.louisville.edu](mailto:prcl-l@listserve.louisville.edu)
3. The following four paragraphs are a distillation of the commentary offered by Walter Wink in "Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way."
4. Gini Reticker and Abigail Disney – documentary "Praying the Devil Back to Hell"
5. Rick Reilly, ESPN (and numerous other cites).