

I have a complicated relationship with this gospel text. Sometimes it's a straightforward connection between what Jesus tells us to do and how we live it out. Sometimes it pushes us because we simply don't want to do what God calls us to do. And sometimes, like today, it's hard to imagine how we live out what we hear.

When that happens, we ask questions. Over and over again we ask, what does this mean for my life of faith – for **our** life of faith? And we ask that question repeatedly over time, because sometimes the answer changes with our experiences.

That's my journey with this text. It's a journey that moves me ever so slowly and haltingly toward nonviolent pacifism in ways that are sometimes so hard to reconcile with my lived experience and the reality of the world around us.

My conversation partners – at least in my own mind – on this journey, in addition to what I find in scripture are two Methodist theologians – some of you will be delighted to hear. I haven't read much of what Stanley Hauerwas has written, but I encountered a specific quote of his in seminary and it sticks with me and comes back to mind whenever I contemplate Jesus' exhortation to turn the other cheek...to give "even your shirt"...to "give to everyone who begs"...and to not ask someone to give back what they have wrongfully taken.

Stanley Hauerwas is a theologian, a pastor, and a pacifist. He wrote a response to 9/11 a few months after that tragic day in which he said, among other words, "Of course living a life of nonviolence may be harsh. Certainly you have to imagine, and perhaps even face, that you will have to watch the innocent suffer and even die for your convictions."

My reaction to hearing these words was a swift and harsh denial. Surely the Christian life I was trying to live doesn't mean standing by while innocents "suffer and even die". Surely the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus doesn't require us to do **nothing** for those who are suffering. I quickly rejected his thinking and the concept of pacifism whole cloth. Instead, I bought into the concept of just war – an ideological and theological concept that says we sometimes have to stand up for those who are in need and commit, what would otherwise be unjustified, violence to defend and protect the innocent.

Some days I'm still there. At times my anger gets the best of me, and I want to go to war against the unjustness in this world and beat the "you-know-what" out of people who are acting with profound and unmitigated hate. My conviction to at least try to be nonviolent seems meaningless in a world that is so in love with violence. There doesn't seem to be any

other way to have an impact.

On those days, I try – emphasis on try – to take a centering breath and remember that nonviolent pacifism is not the same as passivism. And for those of you who didn't hear the difference, that was p-a-c-i-f-i-s-m versus p-a-s-s-i-v-i-s-m. I've started to learn there is a distinct difference between being nonviolent but impactful and being a doormat. And it's such an important and life-giving difference.

Passivism – doing nothing – has no place in the good news of Jesus. When he tells us to love our enemies, do good, pray for those who mistreat, offer the other cheek, and ultimately “do to others as you would have them do to you,” he isn't telling us to stand idly by in the face of injustice and evil. There is no salvific call to be a victim. Salvation comes through sacrificial love that looks to the world like victimhood. But it is anything but.

This is where the words of Walter Wink, another Methodist theologian, help us reimagine our response to the hate of this world. He wrote a book in 2003 titled, “Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way”. That Third Way is a nonviolent response in the face of the world's violence that breaks us out of fight or flight. I know we've added freeze to our options, but that happened after his book was written.

Imagine for a moment those psychological responses to fear or injustice – fight, flight, or freeze. “Fight” is violent. The story of Jesus tells us that violence isn't the answer. What he says in this sermon shared by Luke specifically rules out being violent to those who are violent. “Flight and freeze” are passive and don't necessarily end the violence and don't connect with God's salvation. So, what are we to do?

To understand what Jesus is saying, we have to dig a bit into the culture into which Jesus was speaking. How many of you are left-handed? Okay, for the sake of this argument, you have to pretend you're not. Because no one was in 1st century culture. I know that isn't actually true, but much like what some of you may have experienced growing up, left-handedness was unacceptable, and everyone would have been taught to use their right hand instead. The left hand, in fact, was considered unclean and not used for any social interaction whatsoever.

Which brings us to the act of striking someone on the cheek. Keep in mind how strictly this society followed rules of honor and shame. Every social act had a cost to it. Shaming somebody or giving them honor had a profound impact on their life.

Now imagine there are two ways to strike someone on the cheek. You could make a fist and offer a roundhouse to the cheekbone – with your right hand of course. I suppose it

could be an open slap, but hitting someone in that way was considered honorable. Violent, but with no sense of shame attached – no humiliation.

Imagine, instead of you used your right hand to backhand someone on the other cheek – what would have been their right cheek. It's an insult. It shames that person. The Mishnah – the oral tradition of the Torah – even codified this. Striking a peer with a fist could bring a fine of 4 zuz – a very small sum. Striking a peer with a backhand could be a 400 zuz fine – not a small sum. Backhanding an **underling** bore no penalty whatsoever.

Now take this perspective on striking a cheek and put Jesus' words to it. "If anyone strikes you on the cheek..." if they backhand you to hurt you and dishonor you, "offer the other also." There's no violent response. There's no punch back, there's no flight, but there is a defiant act of nonviolence. What happens next? The person who struck you has a choice. They can't backhand you again, because you've turned the cheek away from them.

I know – they could just backhand you in the nose instead but remember this is analogy and referring to very codified behavior.

They could – using that same hand – punch you in the other cheek. But in so doing, they no longer shame you. Hitting you again would bring you honor and take it from them. Turning your cheek isn't an invitation to more abuse in a passive way. It's a stance that says that won't happen again without tremendous cost to the abuser.

It's an incomplete analogy in our world as we no longer have such clearly defined rules about honor and shame. But it's part of the journey. We are challenged by these words of Jesus to find a way to change the world without resorting to the violent tactics of the unjust.

We don't stand up to injustice and evil by acting unjustly or evilly. We defiantly turn our cheek and reclaim the honor we have in Christ.

I still want to punch people sometimes, but I'll keep coming back to the words of Hauerwas and Wink. I'll keep coming back to cross to look on the fulfillment of salvation in an act of nonviolence that nevertheless changed the world. And I'll keep trying to follow. Amen.