First Reading Luke 6:31 Do unto others (The Golden Rule)

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

Second Reading Matthew 5:38-41 Turn the other cheek (Non-violence)

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'[a] 39 But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. But whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other as well. 40 And if anyone sues you in a court of law and takes away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go a mile,[b] go with him two."

Third Reading Gleanings from The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh CXXX

"Be generous in prosperity and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility."

Sermon The Golden Rule, Non-Violence and the Purpose of Religion

These passages from sacred scripture both inspire us and command to us be moral. They set a an incredibly high standard for ethical human behavior which may seem unattainable. The first reading from Luke is a statement of the Golden Rule, which is the fundamental ethical principle found in every religion. But it is difficult to follow. It's not easy to do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Instead, most people do unto others as others do unto them. This is responding in kind to how others treat us. If your sibling calls you a name or takes your cookie or insults you or hits you, you most likely do the same to them. This tit-for-tat behavior is reacting to others and letting them set the norm rather than consciously acting according to a higher moral standard. Doing unto others as they do unto you is the most common norm governing human behavior not only of individuals but also conflict between rival gangs as well as nations. Following this law of the jungle, and the street, or power politics, quickly spirals into revenge, cycles of retribution, and war. Following our instinct for revenge leads to violence. But what is the alternative to violence? Isn't violence necessary and practical? If someone hits me and I don't

hit back, aren't I a sucker? Why should give in to a bully? Doesn't that make me a powerless, spineless, victim? Shouldn't I stand up for myself and fight against oppression?

Violence or passive victimization are not the only options. In our second reading from Luke, Jesus offers a third way which is non-violent, but also transforming and redemptive. And by turning the other cheek, Jesus is in no way urging us to give in to the oppressor. He is instead giving us a powerful model of how to intervene & change the power dynamics of oppression, by insisting that the evil doer see our humanity and giving them an opportunity to do the right thing.

Unfortunately letting an evildoer walk all over me is a frequent misinterpretation of this "turn the other cheek" passage based on the common translation of the Bible into English from ancient Greek. Since I don't read ancient Greek I will now quote in its entirety the late Rev. Walter Wink's explanation of what Jesus means by "turn the other cheek" from his sermon entitled Nonviolence for the Violent (https://www.lutheranpeace.org/articles/transcript-of-walter-winks-nonviolence-for-the-violent/):

Let's turn then to what Jesus has to say about nonviolence. He says this,"you heard it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist one who is an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. And if anyone sues you for your outer garment give your undergarment as well. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it for two."

The normal or natural reaction to being slapped, sued, or forced to carry a soldier's pack was irritation, outrage, or violence.

The structure of violence is quite simple. Do unto others as they have done unto you.

Consequently, we always mirror our opponent and become the very thing that we hate.
Jesus offers a third way.
With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored and engaged without capitulation. Jesus councils resistance but without violence.
The Greek word translated "resist" in Matthew 5 is "anti-stenai"."anti" means "against" and "stenai" means "stand." So anti-stenai is translated as "standing against" or resisting.
What the translators have overlooked is that anti-stenai is most often used in the Greek version of the Old Testament as a technical term for warfare.

So when Jesus says "do not anti-stenai (resist) one who is evil," he is telling us not to go to war with them.
So instead of "do not resist an evil person" the the passage would be better translated "do not resist evil with violence." We should resist evil but not with violence. Rather we should resist a tyrant or unjust law by refusing to comply or cooperate or go along with it.

King James of England was profoundly disturbed during the Protestant Reformation that Presbyterians from Geneva were smuggling copies of the Geneva Bible into England.

He condemned them. The marginal note says “seditious, dangerous, and traitorous for endorsing the right to overthrow a tyrant.” The King was not amused. Therefore he authorized a new translation. The authorized version King James Bible was written with part of its intention to prevent insurrection.
Jesus is not telling us to submit to evil, but to refuse to oppose it on its own terms. He is urging us to transcend both passivity and violence by finding a third way. One that is assertive and yet, nonviolent. He gives us three examples of how to do this in today’s reading.

1. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also.

Jesus says “right cheek” very explicitly. So we’re not talking about getting punched by a right fist to your left cheek.
And the left hand was never used in public since it was used for unclean acts like “wiping your arse.”
So in order for someone to strike you on the right cheek, they would have to hit you with the back of their right hand.

Now the backhand is not used for injuring people, it’s for humiliating people, degrading them. Masters backhand their slaves, husbands wives, parents children, Romans Jews, it’s always one down. So it’s inserting a person back in the social role he plays as an inferior. The whole point was to force someone who was out of line to get back in line.

Notice Jesus’ audience here. “If anyone strikes you”, the kind of people Jesus was talking to, peasants, day laborers, slaves, these are people who are used to being thus degraded. He is saying to them, “refuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek.”

After turning your other cheek, your right cheek is no longer accessible to someone trying to backhand you. However, your left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow of the right fist. But only equals fought with fists. And the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling’s equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. He can have this slave beaten, but he can intimidate him no longer.

By turning the cheek then, the inferior party is saying “I’m not inferior to you. I’m a human being. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I’m a child of God. I won’t take it anymore.”

The powers that be have lost their power to make people submit. And when large numbers begin behaving thus - Jesus was already depicted as addressing a crowd - you have a social revolution on your hands.

In that world of honor and shaming the superior has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He's been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, the first principle of non-violent action is that of non-compliance.

How different this is from the usual view that this passage teaches us to turn the other cheek so our batterer can simply clobber us again. How often that interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children, and it was never what Jesus intended in the least. To such victims he advises "stand up for yourselves! Take control of your responses! Don't answer the oppressor in kind, but find a new third way that is neither cowardly submission, nor violent reprisal.

2. Jesus' second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law.

"And if anyone sues you for your outer garment give your undergarment as well."

A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan. Only the poorest of the poor were subjected to such treatment. A creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor man's long outer robe but it had to be returned each evening so that that poor person would have something in which to sleep.

Jesus is not advising people to add to their disadvantage by renouncing justice all together as so many commentators have suggested. He is telling impoverished debtors who have nothing left but the clothes on their backs to use the system against itself. Indebtedness was a plague in first century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. Heavy debt was not, however, a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman Imperial policy.

Caesars taxed the wealthy heavily to fund their wars and bankroll the bureaucracy. The rich naturally sought non-liquid investments to hide their wealth. Land was best, but it was ancestrally owned, passed down over generations. And no peasant would voluntarily relinquish it. However, exorbitant interest of twenty five to two hundred and fifty percent could be used to drive land-owners even deeper into debt. And debt, coupled with the high taxation required to pay Roman Tribute created the economic privilege to pry Galilean peasants loose from their land.

By the time of Jesus we see this process already far advanced. Large estates, owned by absentee landlords, managed by stewards, and worked by tenant farmers, day laborers, and slaves. Many of whom had formerly been landowners. It's no accident that the very first action of Jewish revolutionaries in 66 AD when the Roman War began was to burn the temple treasury where the record of debts was kept. Their own temple.

It is into this situation that Jesus speaks. As before, his hearers are the poor. "If anyone would sue you." They share a hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, and finally even their outer garments. Why then does Jesus counsel them to give up their undergarments as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing

and marching out of court stark naked. They didn't have jockey underwear. There were two items of clothing: the outer and the inner. But nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell less on the naked party rather than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness.

By stripping, the debtor has then brought shame on the creditor. There stands the creditor covered in shame. The poor debtor's outer garment in one hand, the inner garment in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor.

The debtor had no hope of winning the case. The law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate. He has risen above shame. At the same time he has registered a stunning protest against the system that has created his debt. He has said in effect, "you want my robe? Here! Take everything! Now you've got all that I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?" Imagine the debtor leaving court naked.

This is guerilla theater. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply punitive however. Since it offers the creditor a chance to see perhaps what his practices cause and to repent.

The powers that be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing deflates them more effectively than lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seek the initiative. Even when structural change is not immediately possible. This message, far from counseling an unattainable otherworldly perfection is a practical strategic measure for empowering the oppressed.

Jesus' teaching on nonviolence provides a hint of how to take on the entire system by unmasking it's essential cruelty and using humor to bring the pretentious to justice. The poor will no longer be treated as sponges to be squeezed dry by the rich. They can accept the laws as they stand, push them to absurdity, and reveal them for what they are. They can strip naked, walk out before their fellows and leave the creditors and the whole economic edifice that they represent, stark naked.

Let's turn now to the third example of a non-violent tactic that Jesus recommend in today's reading:

3. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it for two.

This example is drawn from the practice of limiting to a single mile the amount of forced or oppressed labor that Roman soldiers could levy on subject people. The soldiers had the right to force civilians to carry their pack, but they had to re-assume it after one mile, or the soldier would be punished.

Such compulsory service was a constant feature in Palestine from Persian to late Roman times. Whoever was found on the street could be coerced into service as was Simon of Cyrene who was forced to carry Jesus's cross. Armies had to be moved with dispatch. Ranking officers bought slaves or donkeys to carry their packs of sixty to eighty-five pounds, not including weapons. The majority of the rank and file however had to depend on impressed civilians. Entire villages sometimes fled in order to avoid being forced to carry soldier's baggage.

What we've overlooked in this passage is the fact that carrying the pack a second mile is an infraction of military code.

So now the soldier fears being punished.

But why carry the soldier's pack a second mile? Does this not go to the opposite extreme by aiding and abetting the enemy? Not at all. The question here, as in the two previous instances is how the oppressed can recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed.

Imagine then, the soldier's surprise when at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack and the civilian says, "Oh no. Let me carry it another mile." Why would he want to do that? What's he up to? Normally soldiers have to coerce people to carry their packs, but this dude does so cheerfully and will not stop. This is a provocation - is he insulting the soldier's strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to violate the rules of impressment? Will the civilian file a complaint? Create trouble?

From a situation of servile impressment, the oppressed have once more seized the initiative. They've taken back the power of choice. They have thrown the soldier off balance by depriving him of the predictability of his victim's response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now he must make a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him.

If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine a Roman infantry man pleading with a Jew to give him back his bag.

"Oh give me back my pack!" The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but it can scarcely have been lost on Jesus's hearers, who must have been delighted at the prospect of discomforting their oppressors. Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk the second mile in order to build up merit in heaven or to be pious, or to kill the soldier with kindness. Rather he is helping an oppressed people to find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire.

He is not giving a non political message of spiritual world transcendence. No, he is formulating a worldly spirituality in which the people at the bottom of society who are under the thumb of an Imperial power can learn to recover their humanity.

One could easily use Jesus's advice vindictively. That is why we must not separate it from the command to love one's enemies that is integrally connected with it in Matthew and Luke. But

love is not averse to taking the law and using its oppressive momentum to throw the soldier into a region of uncertainty and anxiety that he has never before known.

These three examples then amplify what Jesus meant when he said: “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil.” Instead of flight or fight, Jesus offers a third way.

With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored.
They can begin to behave with dignity and recover humanity now.

Here indeed was a way to resist the powers that be without being made over into their likeness.
Jesus did not endorse armed revolution. But not complying lay the foundations for a social revolution.

To an oppressed people, Jesus is saying, “do not continue to acquiesce in your oppression. But do not react violently to them either. Rather find that third way. A way that is neither submission nor assault. Neither flight nor fight. A way that can secure your human dignity and begin to change the power equation even now, before the revolution.

Turn your cheek. Thus indicating to the one who backhands you that his attempts to shame you into servility have failed. Strip naked and parade out of court. Thus taking the momentum of the law and the whole debt economy and flipping them Aikido-like in the burlesque of legality. Walk a second mile. Surprising the occupation troops by placing them in jeopardy with their superiors.

In short, take the law and push it to the point of absurdity. These of course are not rules to be followed legalistically. But examples to spark an infinite variety of creative responses in new and changing circumstances. They break the cycle of humiliation with humor and even ridicule. Exposing the injustice of the system. They recover for the poor a modicum of initiative that can force the oppressors to see them in a new light.

Jesus is not advocating non-violence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy. But as a just means of opposing the enemy in a way that holds open the possibility of the enemy’s becoming just also. If possible, we want both sides to win. This is necessary since we will usually have to live with our opponents after the conflict is over. As in South Africa. We are summoned to pray for our enemy’s transformation and respond to ill treatment with love.

The logic of Jesus’ examples in Matthew goes beyond both inaction and overreaction to a new response, fired in the crucible of love, that promises to liberate the oppressed from evil, even as it frees the oppressor from sin. Do not react violently to evil. Do not counter evil in kind. Do not let evil dictate the terms of your opposition. Do not let violence lead you to mirror your opponent. Don’t become the very thing you hate.

This forms the revolutionary principle that Jesus articulates as the basis for nonviolently engaging the powerful. Jesus abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates out of the history of his own people’s struggles, a way by which the oppressor can be resisted without

being emulated. And the enemy neutralized without being destroyed. Those who live by Jesus' words point us to a new way of confronting evil. Whose potential for personal and social transformation we are only beginning to grasp today. (https://www.lutheranpeace.org/articles/nonviolence-for-the-violent-walter-wink/).

For this detailed explanation of Matthew 5, I must credit the late Rev. Walter Wink. I have quoted his sermon entitled Non-violence for the Violent almost in its entirety. And I thank Leslie Frasier for pointing me to Walter Wink's exegesis of Matthew 5. I first encountered a similar interpretation of "turn the other cheek" in a college course entitled Non-violence and Social Change. And it has stuck with me ever since.

My first encounter with the Baha'i faith was also in college, where I majored in philosophy but was also interested in studying the religions of the world. I was struck with their similarities. In every religion we find the same golden rule, which is the basis of all ethics: (http://livingpeaceinternational.org/en/the-project/regola-d-oro-2.html).

Zoroastrianism: "Do not do to others what is harmful for yourself" (Shayast-na-Shayast 13, 29 – between 18th and 15th century BC).

Judaism: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow-man. This is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary" (Talmud, Shabbat 3id – 16th century BC).

Hinduism: "This is the sum of duty. Do not unto others that which would cause you pain if done to you" (Mahabharata 5, 1517 – 15th century BC).

Buddhism: "Whatever is disagreeable to yourself, do not do unto others" (The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5.18 – 6th century BC).

Christianity: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. (Luke 6:31, 1st century)

Islam: "None of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself" (Hadith 13, The Forty Hadith of Imam Nawawi – 7th century).

Baha'i Faith: "Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself. (Bahá'u'lláh, Words of Paradise, 19th century)

The Baha'i Faith refers to the prophets or founders of each of these world religions as Manifestations of God.

I was attracted to the Baha'i Faith because it provided an explanation for the question, if there Is one God, why are there so many religions, and how are they connected?

The Baha'i Faith was founded by Bahá'u'lláh in Persia in 1863.

Bahá'u'lláh enunciated 3 principles:
The Oneness of God
The Oneness of Religion
The Oneness of the Human Family

He likens God to the Sun,
and the founder of each of the world's religions is a like a ray from the same Sun.

The same light shines in every religion.

A Baha'i is a follower of the light.

Baha means Light or glory, and
Baha'u'llah means the Glory of God.

Each Manifestation of God brought the light of god to a dark time and place that needed it most. Each of these Divine Teachers brought to humanity the lessons it needed in order to advance to the next level of its spiritual evolution.
The purpose of religion is to guide/catalyze the spiritual advancement of humanity.
The purpose of humanity is to "carry forward an ever advancing civilization" (Gleanings from The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CIX).

All of the founders of the world's religions are Teachers in the same school, and the sacred scriptures of each religion can be considered chapters in the same book. This book is the source of our spiritual education.

Bahá'u'lláh said to

"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh).

These divine teachers each appeared when humanity was ready to advance to the next level of its spiritual development.
The current developmental stage humanity is going through is that of Adolescence.
We can expect a bumpy ride, full of challenges, but it will be followed by the Most Great Peace.

To sum up:

Sacred scripture both inspires us and commands to us be moral. It sets an incredibly high standard for ethical human behavior.

The purpose of religion is to inspire us to attain a high moral standard, to become a good person, but also to take concrete action in order to create a just world.

In Latin Re-ligere means to “bind together (again).”
So the purpose of religion is to bind people together, to unify all of humanity so that we see one another as one human family.

I will end with the words of Baha’u’llah on the purpose of religion:

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men” (Gleanings from The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, CX).

“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established” (Gleanings from The Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, CXXXI).

“The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch” (Bahá’u’lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf).

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” (Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh).

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