Leviticus 1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

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In middle school, I had a neighbor who delighted in pelting me with gravel each day after school. I don’t remember how long it went on or even what it took to get him to stop. But I can tell you how it made me feel and how I wanted to respond.

He was older and much bigger and stronger than I was. I knew that if I started throwing gravel at him, he would just throw it back harder. I was lucky only my feelings got hurt. Bullying doesn’t always end that well.

Bullies will pick a fight anytime, anywhere. At times there are no witnesses, as in my case, but sometimes their behavior is on full display.

Like at a sporting event, where one player commits a personal foul against another; at school, where one student picks a fight with another in the hallway between classes; at a grocery store where one person berates another for speaking in a foreign language; or at recent campaign rallies, where supporters bullied demonstrators in attendance and demonstrators bullied supporters as they came and left.

Some try to ignore the hostility but often those violent words and actions are met with violence in return, even encouraged. Are you going to take that from him? Are you going to let her get away with that? Are you just going to stand there? You need to do something!

Anywhere, anytime someone hurts you, it’s natural to want to hurt them back. And admit it, doesn’t it make you feel good to get back at someone, just a little bit?

Yes, you need to do something, but when the “something” is responding to bullies with more bullying, Jesus says no. You might have heard that it is okay to retaliate, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I tell you that you shall not resist an evildoer. If you get slapped on the right cheek, offer your left cheek in response. If you are conscripted to walk a mile, walk two miles. If someone takes your coat, give them your shirt as well.

What? And let them get away with it? And be labeled a wimp, a loser, a doormat?

We might not say these things out loud, but some may harbor these sentiments. For others, these feelings are justified – African Americans still suffering the vestiges of slavery and race discrimination, Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans who live with the tattooed numbers of the internment from World War II” resulting from Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt 75 years ago today, survivors of the Holocaust; Hispanic Americans who are told to go home; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons who face ridicule and discrimination and those around the world that suffer at the hands of ISIS, Boko Haram and other terrorist groups like them. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Next to the command to give away all our money, Jesus’ counsel to resist responding to violence with more violence is one of the hardest teachings for us to fathom.

As one preacher notes, this

is Jesus at his ornery best: offering “advice” that makes no sense divorced from the nature of the one giving it. In fact, the wisdom proffered here is not at all new, despite the formulation, “You have heard it said … but I say to you.” In terms of *content* Jesus offers here nothing he did not learn at Mary’s knee. It is in terms of the *speaker* that these words take on radical resonance. Our constant temptation to boil down the hard particulars of Jesus into a mushy, vaguely deistic faith, suitable for a Hallmark card, is here put to rout. Jesus, in all his Jewish, biblical, demanding particularity, will have none of it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

You only need look ahead a few weeks in the lectionary to remember where this is all headed, who Jesus is and the bullies he is about to face. During the season of Lent the scriptures turn us once again toward Jerusalem, where we will journey with Jesus to the cross, where the ultimate wrong will be committed against him.

This is where the identity of today’s preacher causes these words to take on radical resonance. This is where the knowledge of his response to the religious authorities and the Roman governor identifies Jesus not just with particular words but with particular actions. For our sake, he met the violence committed against him not with violence, but with love. In response to their wrongdoing, he forgave his enemies, and he prayed for them.

Likewise, this great act of love should give us pause when we are faced with a bully.

Jesus’ love is not passive, nor does he counsel us to be passive. He doesn’t advise us to let it go. He doesn’t say, just stand there and take it. He calls us to respond. Don’t meet mean spiritedness with more mean spiritedness. Don’t meet violence with more violence. Don’t stoop to the level of the bully. But do something, yes!

Rather than being a doormat, he calls us to stand up to the wrong by doing good. Responding to violence without violence doesn’t mean the other person wins. It doesn’t mean you are condoning the wrong and it doesn’t mean that the wrong should be allowed to continue.

On the contrary, your refusal to respond in kind says to the offender, I am not going to play the game by your rules. I am not bound by them. God’s love has freed me to live my life differently. I am bound only by the rules of love.

From Leviticus we read, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” In other words, you are called to be different, to love, because you belong to God and that’s how God operates, out of love. From Matthew we read, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Don’t just love your neighbors. Even the bullies do that. Love your enemies as well, just as God does. Difficult? Yes. Impossible? Not always.

Examples abound. We just have to look for them.

Most of you will remember that ten years ago this fall

a gunman barricaded himself inside a one-room Amish schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pa. Then he opened fire. … "Charlie" Roberts killed five children and injured five others before killing himself.  
  
The Amish community responded in a way that many found surprising: They forgave the shooter. And, in the years since, they have grown close to his family.

Charlie’s mother, Terri Roberts, shared her memories with StoryCorps last fall. "As I turned on the radio on the way [to my son’s home], the newscaster was reporting that there had been a shooting at the local Amish schoolhouse," she recalls.

"By that time I [got there], I saw my husband and the state trooper standing right in front of me as I pulled in," she continues. "And I looked at my husband, and he said, 'It was Charlie.' He said, 'I will never face my Amish neighbors again.'"

That week, the Robertses had a private funeral for their son, but as they went to the gravesite, they saw as many as 40 Amish start coming out from around the side of the graveyard, surrounding them like a crescent.

"Love just emanated from them," Terri says. "I do recall the fathers saying, 'I believe that I have forgiven,' but there are some days when I question that."

Terri finds it especially hard to accept that forgiveness when she thinks of one of the survivors, Rosanna.

"Rosanna's the most injured of the survivors," she explains. "Her injuries were to her head. She is now 15, still tube-fed and in a wheelchair. And she does have seizures, and when it gets to be this time of year, as we get closer to the anniversary date, she seizes more. And it's certainly not the life that this little girl should have lived."

Terri asked if it would be possible for her to help with Rosanna once a week.

"I read to her, I bathe her, dry her hair," says Terri, who herself is battling cancer.

And, while she can't say it with 100 percent certainty, Terri believes Rosanna knows who she is. "I just sense that she does know," she says.

"I will never forget the devastation caused by my son …. "But one of the fathers the other night, he said, 'None of us would have ever chosen this. But the relationships that we have built through it, you can't put a price on that.' "  
  
"And their choice to allow life to move forward was quit e a healing balm for us," she says. “And I think it's a message the world needs."[[3]](#footnote-3)

The decision of those families not to retaliate or strike out at Terri or her husband, but to be bound instead by the rules of love allowed their lives to move forward. It didn’t bring back their children; it didn’t erase their loss or pain. But the love with which they responded paved the way for healing and wholeness that would not otherwise have been possible, not for them or for the killer’s family.

When you face someone who says or does hurtful things to you, remember the words of Jesus. You have a choice about how to respond. You can play by their rules and be bound by the rules of violence and hate or you can play by God’s rules and be freed to respond in love.

Amen.

1. Jason Byassee, “Theological Perspective on Matthew 5:38-48 in *Feasting on the Word* , Year A, Volume 1, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, p. 383. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. # A Decade After Amish School Shooting, Gunman's Mother Talks Of Forgiveness, www.npr.org,

   September 30, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)