

Matthew 5:38-48
Philippians 4:1-9
September 11, 2011

Sore Cheeks

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹

Those of us who are adults can remember the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001 with a deep pit hollow clarity. We all pretty much know where we were when we first heard of or saw TV images of the Twin Towers, The Pentagon and Pennsylvania. The center would not hold and anarchy was loosed upon the heart. Our sense of safety was crushed. Although William Butler Yeats was probably commenting on the disaster of World War I and the failings of the

¹ From the "Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats in Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats Edited by M.L. Rosenthal, Collier Books, New York 1962, 1978 page 91.

Christian Church is his poem The Second Coming; his words would easily apply to early emotions of 9/11. We were unnerved.

Carefully and rightfully or with an eye on ratings and sensationalism, the media revisited the attacks in every imaginable forum these last few weeks. On the one hand, it is a respectful thing to remember the people who were killed and an honorable thing to remember all the law enforcement and public safety officials who sacrificed personal health and in many cases suffered death in their work to rescue victims and comfort the panicked. On the other hand it a wise thing, after ten years, to step back and contemplate how this attack affected us as a nation and where all these things intersect with our Christian faith.

Our passage from Matthew is from a section of the Gospel known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus went up a hill so that he could be heard by a large crowd of followers and he gave a talk. It's pretty safe to assume that Jesus preached this sermon on many occasions and that this sermon is actually a collection of some of his very best sayings and teachings. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, mainly a Roman Soldier who treats you like a dog smacking you with his back hand, turn the other cheek and make him hit you with his

open hand, thus forcing him to treat you like an equal. If you follow the advice of Jesus, you are not going to engage in violence and you are going to have some seriously sore cheeks.

The 9/11 Memorial at ground zero in New York City has two giant pools covering about acre of land a piece roughly the footprint of the twin towers. Waterfalls pour into the pools on all four sides and the names of the almost 3000 victims are remembered in bronze. The Pentagon memorial with its 184 benches opened in 2008. The Pennsylvania Flight 93 Memorial has a wall of names. The victims of 9/11 have been properly remembered. Several people have pointed out, including George Will in this Morning's Washington Post that on December 6 1951, ten years after Pearl Harbor there was far less a fixation on the events that triggered WWII than there is today on 9/11. We live in a time of hubris.

After we got over the initial shock of the attacks, our country came together fast and was pretty united. It was our moment to stand up together and we did. Churches across the nation rang bells and held impromptu services only hours after the attack. There was a call for services on a given day and most churches responded.

Most of the world was in shock too and the international community reached out to us with sympathy, support and offers to assist.

Within 30 days we invaded Afghanistan and by 2003 we invaded Iraq. Most Christians including most members at Ark and Dove thought that Afghanistan was justified. The doctrine of Just War first posited by Bishop Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century, allowed for the attack on Taliban and terrorist. The Christian Church was greatly divided on Iraq; most people at Ark and Dove were reluctant on Iraq or flat out against it; but not all. Based on the same doctrine of Just War, I preached against the Invasion of Iraq.

As much as some of us thought Iraq was an unethical decision; we thought it equally important to support the troops who follow the orders of the President and sacrifice deeply in times of war. After VBS Adult Education class with much discussion about both wars in 2007; our congregation united around the idea of supporting our troops with The Ribbons of Remembrance grove at the bottom of our hill. We have remembered the names of all the fallen soldiers in both conflicts every Sunday since. We hang yellow ribbons. We also pray for peace and pray for the victims of war In Iraq, Afghanistan and other nations. Purple ribbon are for peace and

green are for the victims of war in Afghnaistand and Iraq. We have fallen a little behind on the hanging of the ribbons; so today you can brave the moist ground and get us caught up.

Ten years later our nation is no longer united and we find ourselves pondering the strategy of waging two wars that we have charged to the national credit card which is called the national debt. We have laid out well over a trillion dollars on the backs of younger generations to conduct war; Not to mention the Trillions we have poured into Homeland Security and Defense. “In the decade following 9/11, the U.S. entered the slippery but well-justified pathway of fear in the search for security. We were increasingly presented with a world divided between "us" and "them." This was particularly true of how we understood and engaged the Muslim world, at home and abroad.”² The world loved us in September 2001, not so now and the Arab and Muslim world holds us mostly in contempt. Although safer today than in 2001; The Bush Administration squandered our status in the world by unilateral actions fueled by a cheeky over confidence in American Exceptionalism. It smarts to

² Transforming enmity, 9/11: Ten years later, Aug 18, 2011 by John Paul Lederach – ChristianCentury.org

hear people say that about us, but hey, look at the way we treat each other. We don't even like ourselves. Partisan Politics is at the height of a great wave of distrust and attack.

So why is it that so many Christians who thought the wars were justified or worse great opportunities for revenge have second thoughts now? There doesn't seem to be the stomach for prolonged conflict? Anger has faded? True soul searching? And war didn't solve our problems. Many reasons I'm sure.

Kind of on the flip side, I am wondering whether American Christians would ever have the Chutzpah (yes that's a mixed metaphor) to spend a trillion and a half dollars on Peace. I mean what if we had stopped the War in Afghanistan after the Taliban were out and Al-Qaeda camps were destroyed and we invested over a Trillion Dollars in ending poverty, combating disease, fighting hunger, promoting interfaith dialogue and teaching democracy and we never invaded Iraq? What if our preemptive strike against terrorism in 2003 was a 21st century Marshall plan to end hunger and poverty? What if we had invested in the Peace Corps instead of the Marine Corps? Bread for the World estimates that something like 15 or 20 Billion a year would eliminate hunger. Heck 20 Billion is a drop in the

bucket, a couple of Stealth jets, that's all. If 150 Billion could kick hunger, what would a Trillion plus do?

Why is it that American Christians would follow Presidents Bush and Obama to Bagdad, Islamabad and Kabul to kick some terrorist tail, but we would not support and would be afraid to suggest that we spend a Trillion Dollars on the least of these, whom Christ the Lord calls us to help? I suspect that for the most part it is because we doubt the Sermon on the Mount. We won't turn our cheeks and we ignore Christ's call to be peacemakers. Here are some of our excuses:

Heck Jesus is ok for private faith, but obviously he is just some hippie liberal idealist who didn't understand the real world.

LOL - you take that cheek stuff literally

I don't suppose we could expect the Son of God to understand the complexities of our modern world.

JK - you don't have to love your neighbors

I guess he was just espousing some values to which we should aspire.

I'm sure there is a longer list of cheap junk excuses for failing to follow Christ; but we get the point. We have many practical

reasons for being out of “sync” with Jesus. Our relative comfort and wealth buys our faith down to spiritual principles.

You know what? If Jesus was running for President in this country, there is no way he would get elected. The Tea Party would laugh him out the door. The Democrats would urge him to adopt some practical centrist positions. But Matthew’s Gospel as a whole and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, repeatedly insist that Jesus means exactly what he says. Turn the other cheek, love your neighbor and your enemy, give to anyone who begs from you, pray for those who persecute you, walk the second mile. Jesus would not make the choices we make.

I am not saying slash the Military, sell your possessions, trust the terrorists, give all your money away, live in a commune and be gentle with China; but could we dream a little here? Could we place just a little more trust in the one whom we profess to be our Lord and Savior? Could we actually pray for peace, I mean really make room in our hearts for God’s vision of a peaceable kingdom? Peace is not just a bumper sticker; it is the state world that God longs for.

As things fall apart and the centre is flung off balance, we need to release our imaginations to work on world issues in ways other

than conflict and violence. You know thirty years ago when someone said habitat, most of us would think wildlife, sociology, anthropology. Yet Today Habitat for Humanity whose goal it is to eliminate sub standard housing is the world's largest home builder. It could be that our partnership with Jewish and Islamic congregations and organizations to build houses for low income people in need, may be one of the most effective acts of peacemaking in which we have participated. The more people understand each other at the deepest level, the greater the chance for Peace. The blood dimmed tide still flows, but perhaps Anarchy can be held at bay through discipleship and by putting Christ at the center.