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# “Doormats & Dignity”

Matthew 5:38-48



CCUMC  
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One summer evening in Broken Bow, Nebraska, a weary truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop. He was tired and hungry. The waitress had just served three tough-looking, leather-jacketed bikers decided to give him a hard time. Not only did they verbally abuse him, one of them grabbed the hamburger off his plate, another took a handful of his french fries and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

How did this trucker respond? How would you respond? Well, this trucker did not respond as you might expect. Instead, he calmly got up, picked up his check, walked to the end of the counter, put the check and his money on the register, and quietly went out the door. The waitress followed him to put the money in the till and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night. When she returned, one of the cyclists said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?"

She replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure isn't much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the parking lot."

Does anybody else feel like I've been getting up here every Sunday and every sermon I say the same thing? "Today's passage is a hard one." Today is no exception. We've been looking at really difficult passages lately haven't we?

Last week Jesus said it isn't good enough to just not murder someone - we can't be angry at them, either. He told us it's not good enough to just not commit adultery - we also shouldn't even think about it. He told us it's not good enough to divorce our husbands or wives for anything, except in the case of sexual immorality. Jesus told us it's not good enough to only tell the truth and keep our promises when we are under oath, but we have to do it all the time. And all those things are hard. But I think today's topic is one of the hardest, maybe because this passage is no exaggeration. We don't have to lose any limbs!

Today we look at turning the other cheek and loving your enemies – going the second mile. Now, throughout the Sermon on the Mount so far, Jesus has been quoting parts of the Old Testament, as well as quoting some of the religious traditions that had sprung up along the way. And today we have another one of those passages where expectations – the norms of the day are turned upside down. Don't retaliate? The meek inherit the earth? Turn the other cheek? Are losers winners now? It seems Jesus is trying to turn us all into doormats!

Nothing could be further from the truth. Love your enemies? The people of Jesus' time had probably never heard anything like this before – ever! And honestly, I imagine they didn't quite know how to take these shocking words of Jesus considering the number of enemies they face every day. Think of it – political informants and Roman overlords, tax collectors and money lenders.

Jesus was talking mostly to the Galileans. With poor soil and little rain, they lived in one of the poorest regions of Israel. And as usual, in Galilee it was the poor who always suffered the most.

Get this: any Roman soldier was allowed to ask – or command – any citizen to carry his bags for him, and they would be obliged to carry them for a thousand steps. Who's he likely to use, a wealthy merchant or the peasant? "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." And while a Roman official might back-hand a slave he wouldn't be as likely try that with a Pharisee or a member of the Sanhedrin.

But Jesus wasn't preaching to the Sanhedrin. He wasn't teaching the Pharisees – well, He kinda was! But He was there for the people of Galilee...for the poor. And to answer the daily question they must have had to be asking – How do I live with dignity when I am treated like nothing?

This is the same question, btw, that was asked by black people in South Africa, South America, and here in the 50's & 60's. It the question that was asked by Jews in Germany, and Indians in India; the same question that's asked by abused spouses and disabled people all over the world, by gay teens and single moms and their children forced to live in their cars. "How do I live with dignity when I am treated like nothing?"

Jesus' answer? Go the extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Give them your coat as well...

And Jesus says to the Galileans, "When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Picture this: in the Middle East the left hand is used for one thing and one thing only while the right hand is used for everything else. The left hand is unclean, right? So for someone to strike a person on the right cheek it would have to be a back hand – the way one would strike a slave or an inferior. Jesus is telling them to offer the left cheek which would force the perpetrator to use either their fist or an open hand like this [demonstrate]. Hold your head up. You have dignity as human child of God. Don't let someone else take that away from you. Don't let someone else define you as "less than."

"If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them your cloak as well." Old Testament law allowed the poor to use their outer garment as collateral for a loan. But if they did, the coat had to be returned each night so they could sleep in it and the creditors would have to come and get in the morning.

Francis of Assisi took this quite literally; Francis' father was a merchant of fine fabrics and quite wealthy. When Francis renounced his wealth to live a life of poverty, he stripped down in the town square and stood there quite naked. In the ancient world, more even than today, nakedness was considered shameful, but even more so, anyone who sees a naked person is shamed as well, so to give your coat also would've been very confrontational.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was confrontational. Bonhoeffer was one of the only voices in WWII, German or otherwise, that was raised in an effort to get the German Protestant church to resist Hitler's persecution of the Jews. He fought Nazism because he knew that every person – even the Jews of the 1930's – is made in the image of God and therefore deserves dignity and respect - Period.

What this meant was that Bonhoeffer was fighting against his own church, because they were prepared to accept Hitler as head of the church instead of Jesus simply as an act of self-preservation. They chickened out. The German Protestant Church sold out to the political powers of the day, only to discover that they were complicit in the murder of 6 million Jews.

Of course Bonhoeffer was thrown in prison and after a year and a half was hanged naked with a thin metal wire -- Hanged because he was confrontational. Hanged because after he received his doctorate *cum laude* at the age of 21 – smart, huh? – he went to New York to study, and while he was there he became, as the article says, "conscientised."

I think these scholars make up words, don't you? He started attending a black Baptist church in Harlem and fell in love with Negro Spirituals. But more than that he started to become aware of what his theology looked like 'from below.' Meaning, he began to understand what life was like for those who are marginalized, powerless, and suffering social injustice. Because he became conscientious to the dignity of marginalized black people in Harlem, he was able to transfer that to the dignity of marginalized Jewish people in Germany. He stood up.

So we have to ask ourselves, and I know that this day and age we think we're somehow beyond this, but really, think for minute, "Who do I think is beneath me?" We all do it. Sure, we try not to. But some of us still think that disabled people are less; or that gay

people are beneath us, rich people are scum, and old people, young people, taxi drivers or hairstylists are somehow less than. We all do it on some level.

But you know what happens when we lift our heads and offer the other cheek or our cloak, or go that second mile? This is from Frederick Beuchner's book "Whistling in the Dark:" He writes, when you lift your head, offering the other cheek, gaining your own dignity back, you see your enemy's eyes. "You see the lines in their faces and the way they walk when they're tired. You see who their husbands and wives are, maybe. You see where they're vulnerable and where they're scared. Maybe you catch a glimpse of where their hatefulness comes from. In seeing the hurt they cause you, you see the hurt they cause themselves." We don't love them by far – no, not yet, if ever frankly. But we see that they're human, even as we are human; and you can begin to see how to pray for them. In taking back our own dignity we can also give dignity back to the enemy. Here's a good prayer for this situation: "God forgive them because I sure can't!" it's not much but any prayer for an enemy is breakthrough isn't it?

Think of the dignity this mother showed in this story of loving an enemy.

The **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** (TRC) was a court-like body assembled in [South Africa](#) after the abolition of [apartheid](#).<sup>[2]</sup> Witnesses who were identified as victims of gross human rights violations were invited to give statements about their experiences, and some were selected for public hearings. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request [amnesty](#) from both civil and criminal prosecution.

In *Rumors of Another World* by Philip Yancy, Yancy describes how in a Truth and Reconciliation hearing, a policeman by the name of Van de Broek recounted for the commission how he, together with other officers, had shot at point blank range an 18 year old boy, and then burned the body to destroy the evidence. The policeman went on to describe, how eight years later, he returned to the boy's home and forced his mother to watch as he bound her husband, poured petrol over him and set him on fire. Yancy tells us that as Van de Broek spoke the room grew quieter and quieter. And when the story was finished, the judge turned to the woman and asked: 'what do you want from Mr van de Broek?'

She replied, 'I want him to go to the place my husband was burned, and gather up the dust there so that I can give him a decent burial.' Van de Broek, head down, nodded in assent. 'Then,' she said, 'Mr Van de Broek took all my family away from me, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to my home and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr Van de Broek to

know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.”

I cannot imagine what having Van de Broek in her home must have cost this mother, this wife, this woman. I cannot imagine what her neighbors thought of her. But what dignity, and what healing and hope she brought through her love for her enemy, not just to herself, and not just for him, but for all who hear the story.

We don't love our neighbors because they deserve it. We love them because they are our sisters, and our brothers, and because God, while we were yet sinners, loved us first. And if we want to live with dignity and respect, we have to offer dignity and respect; individually and as a church.