

Sermon: Outgunned, Outmanned, Outnumbered, Outplanned
Text: Luke 6:27-38
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Context: WWPC
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But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies . . .

Luke 6:27a

On August 6, 2015, Lin-Manuel Miranda's brilliant musical, Hamilton, made it's Broadway debut at the Richard Rodgers Theater, changing musical theater forever.

As you likely know, and as its name suggests, the show is largely about the rise of Alexander Hamilton, from destitute immigrant to one of America's most influential Founding Fathers.

But it's also about a crisis moment in American history, when the fate of the thirteen original colonies was still very much in doubt.

In one pivotal scene, the British Admiral, Richard Howe, has amassed thirty two thousand naval troops in New York harbor.

In response to this demoralizing news, then-General George Washington strides onto the stage and announces:

We are outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered, outplanned.

It's against that backdrop that the remainder of the first act of Hamilton plays out. A relatively small band of completely overmatched rebels, fighting for their future and the future of their nascent country, against a highly trained, well-resourced professional army.

Which, in some ways, is not so different from the situation in which the disciples finds themselves in Luke's gospel.

A small band, indeed, a tiny band, of dramatically overmatched volunteers, working to realize the Kingdom of God, while surrounded by a highly trained, well-resourced, occupying army of professional Roman soldiers.

What does one do in those circumstances? How do you survive? Maintain your identity? Advance your cause? Preserve your values? Preserve your soul?

Most importantly: How do you achieve your goals? Specifically, how do you implement and advance the Kingdom of God, when all you've got is a couple of loaves of donated bread and a handful of fish, and they've got all the guns and all the money?

I believe the answer to that question is found in the text for today, and in the text that surrounds it. For this passage is taken from the Sermon on the Mount. Morally and ethically, this is Jesus's Magnum Opus.

This is where the founder of the Christian faith gives his followers, including us, their marching orders.

The great problem with this idea -- that this is the answer to the question of how to implement the Reign of God -- is that the teaching that Jesus gives us in this sermon seems like a recipe for surrender rather than resistance, for certain defeat rather than ultimate triumph.

The colonial army under George Washington was outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered, outplanned.

But under his leadership, the American forces defeated their British adversaries through a combination of strategic brilliance -- including guerilla warfare -- and, yes, explosive violence.

Here Jesus tells his followers not only not to fight the Romans, he appears to tell them the exact opposite.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Sadly, a literal reading of this passage has resulted in some deeply regrettable outcomes. For example, it has led heaven knows how many pastors to counsel too many spouses to stay with abusive husbands.

And slave owners were known to employ this text as a way of controlling their subjects. *I can hit you, and when I do, you have to turn the other cheek and let me hit that one, too.*

But if you read the gospels as whole, it is impossible to imagine that the Jesus portrayed in its pages would condone such violence.

And he's not doing so here. A growing number of biblical scholars and military historians have begun to realize that the teaching Jesus gives us here is actually highly subversive. *

But it only makes sense if you bear in mind the context. That an overmatched band of unarmed volunteers are trying to implement an alternative to the Roman empire, right under their noses.

Even in those days people didn't just go around slapping one another on the cheek. The only people who would do such a thing were slave masters, or soldiers. And the only people they would do that to were their slaves, or their subjects.

At that time it was also true -- and this is still true in certain parts of the world -- the left hand was used to clean up after certain bodily functions. And so the left hand was itself unclean.

Which means that a "superior" would only ever strike a slave or a subject with the right hand.

To turn the other cheek to your abuser would force them to strike you with their left hand. A way of saying, you have violated me once. To violate me again, you are also going to have to violate yourself.

Turning the other cheek was, in fact, an act of resistance, the only one available to an unarmed person facing a dominate adversary. This was the genesis of non-violent resistance. Gandhi understood this. So did Dr. King.

And in their respective contexts -- colonial India, the American south -- they applied this teaching, this non-violent yet active form of resistance, in a way that served to change the world.

But then of course comes the hardest teaching of all, but also the most subversive weapon in Jesus' arsenal: Love your enemies. Because if you find a way to love them, you turn them into something other than enemies.

But how in the world does one do that? What would that even look like?

I think offering answers to that question that are too easy, or too quick, or too simple, does a disservice both to the Gospel and to everyone who hears it.

For starters, I believe that everyone needs to wrestle with the answer to what such love looks like for themselves, and I can't tell you what that is.

What I can say is that if someone were threatening my wife or my family or my congregation with violence, I'm not sure love for my enemy is the first thing I would think about.

The first thing I would think about is how to best love -- and protect -- my wife, or my family or all of you.

That said, this command is not optional. It is arguably the most revolutionary thing Jesus ever said, the most consequential thing his followers can do in a world brimming with hate and fraught with violence.

So here is what I would say about it. Loving your enemy is not something you do overnight. I think it's something you practice, something you learn to do over a lifetime.

When he was eighty-one years old, the great cellist Pablo Casals was asked why he continues to practice four and five hours a day.

He is said to have answered: "Because I think I am making progress."

Loving our enemies takes practice. But where do we start?

Well, as she so often does, I think Anne Lamott has the answer to that question:

We start by refusing to let our enemies get us to hate them. She writes -- and I'm going to quote her extensively here:

"How did we become so filled with hate? This is not who we are. Certain special people of late have caused a majority of us to experience derangement.

"Hate is comforting, but regrettably, it's malignant. I loathe certain public individuals with great wriggling discomfort and it steadies me. It's not white-hot hate, as I can't afford to be ignited and let it consume my life, but there is a lot of heat in there, a combination of sickness and fire.

"[Hate] steals from me what one might call my better angels, my higher self, my center. Such is war.

"I have been one of the walking wounded for a year or so -- actually more like a zombie, because we are fused with people when we hate them. We're not us anymore. We become like them.

“They -- Them -- are really not doing anything to us. To some extent, I am doing it to myself--the zombification is complete. I’m all parts: host, carrier, victim.

“I can’t change them. So I pray. Bless them with nice retirement opportunities, and change me, but while You’re at it, help them not to blow up the entire world. Thanks.” Amen!

She continues:

“When I finally got to the point that I couldn’t take it anymore, I decided to put down my weapons briefly. Maybe I would end up on the winning side, calmer, or at least less deranged. So as is my habit, I asked God for help with the mess of me. God immediately sent in two [specialists].

“The first was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who reminded me that hate cannot drive out hate, only love can to that.

“That’s [so frustrating]. Yet it was enough for me to realized I needed palliative care.

“The second specialist was an eight-year-old boy. I asked one of my Sunday school kids if he believed God was always with him, helping him. He thought about this for a moment and replied, “Maybe forty percent.”

“Forty percent! What if I could reduce my viral load by forty percent.

“Awareness helped me make progress in my evolution, like going from finger paints [to brushes and acrylics].

“I began to hear the voices of people who called me out on my hate. In a recent sermon, my pastor cited the Dr. King quotation I had just come upon, that hate cannot drive out hate, that only love can do that, and I thought, “Yeah, I heard it the first time.”

“Then at the end of the sermon, wrapping up, she said, sighing, “Just don’t let them get you to hate them.” **

What I would say is that not letting our enemies get us to hate them is a very good place to start. But I hope it’s not where we end up.

Because I think we can do better than that. I think we need to do better than that. Our situation is not unlike that of the disciples, and it’s not so unlike that of those early colonists.

It feels like we're fighting to save the soul of our country. And I don't know about you but to me it often feels like we are outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered, outplanned.

But we're also fighting to save our own souls in the process. I think learning to love our enemies is part of that. The command is not optional. But what that means and what that looks like, and just exactly how we do this, I think all of that is something for us to work through together.

It's not easy. It's hard work. But it's also the best work we can do. Because it is by our love -- our love for God, for our neighbors and for ourselves, and, yes, for our enemies -- that the world will know we are Christ's disciples.

Amen

Attributions:

- * Walter Wink *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*; Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*
- ** Anne Lamott *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*