

Matthew 5: 38-42

What Does it Mean to be a Revolutionary?

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The Congregational Church of Needham

During October, our worship theme is Who was Jesus? Throughout the month we have chosen 4 provocative aspects of Jesus for this sermon series – Rabbi, Healer, Revolutionary and Savior.

Jesus was such a complex and charismatic man that all during his life and ever since his death people have pondered the meaning of his life and his very identity. No one disputes that Jesus was a great prophet who spoke with God and spoke for God. There is no disputing that Jesus was an incredible rabbi, and one of the greatest healers that the world has even known. There is no disputing that Jesus was subversive and provocative. He irritated his enemies and he alienated his friends. But there was something so compelling about him that people have been pondering the meaning of his life for 20 centuries.

Who was he, really? Was he the Messiah? While he was alive Jews argued openly about that question, and still the question hangs in the air for many Jewish scholars. Among Christians there are other debates. Did he come to die for the sins of the world? Or was his death inevitable, given the way he lived and how controversial he was? Was he the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World, the Way to find God, or was he the wisest teacher ever? No matter what you think about Jesus it is hard to ignore the significance of his life in the history of the world. I hope that this series will spark your own conversations. I hope it will re-invigorate your questions and excite you enough to embark on your own spiritual quest.

Today we will look at the edgy and subversive qualities that were so central to Jesus' character and way of being in the world, and looking at the issues of his time. Jesus was a revolutionary. We don't

have to look far to see how subversive Jesus was. The evidence is in today's passage. But over time the notion that Jesus was radical has been down-played and even completely misunderstood. One of the best examples of that is in today's scripture reading, and in the way that it has been so flagrantly misunderstood. Let's take a closer look.

Matthew 5 says – Turn the other cheek, and we know what that means- be nice. Be kind. Give of yourself. Actually, that is not what Jesus says at all.

1. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. 2000 years ago people used their right hand for business, for eating, for dispensing punishment. When a Roman struck a Jew, he would use his right hand on the Jew's right cheek, but he would backhand him. The back of the hand added insult to injury.

Jesus says, if they hit you like that, offer your left cheek also. Jesus is not telling us to invite more abuse, but he suggested that they stand up to the abuse. If you offer your left cheek, you confuse your enemy. He cannot backhand you with his right hand. He had to hit you with an open hand which signifies you are his equal.

2. If someone wants to sue you and take your coat give him your cloak as well. People in terrible debt had to give their coat as collateral. Jesus said, if someone takes your coat as collateral- strip down to your underwear. Why? In those days it was embarrassing to see someone else naked Not to be naked yourself. Jesus says, if they try to denigrate by taking your clothes, embarrass them by showing yourself stripped naked and point out the results of their economy.
3. If anyone forces you to go a mile for them, go the extra mile, too. Roman soldiers always had heavy backpacks, and they were allowed by law to force anyone in the occupied lands to carry their gear for a mile- but no more. In that desert terrain, one mile was plenty. Jesus

says- if they force you, then carry it another mile and watch the soldier start to beg you for his pack back.

What does it mean that Jesus was so subversive? What does it mean that many of us over look this interpretation or completely misunderstand it? What does it mean that Jesus was edgy and provocative? What does it mean that Jesus was revolutionary in his time and still today?

In the first place, Jesus was a truth teller. Anyone who wonders why Jesus was killed just does not understand how bold and mouthy he was. He spoke his mind and did not count the cost. He reminded people of the most irritating things Romans could do to you, in Matthew 5. He was outspoken about how oppressive the rules of his own faith had become. So he healed people on the Sabbath, and defended his right to bring relief to those who suffered.

Three young women in a punk band in Russia stormed the altar of a Moscow orthodox cathedral to sing a song which criticized Vladimir Putin. In August a judge sentenced them to 2 years in Russian prison. A modern example of what happens to people who speak the truth to powerful people.

Most people chose sides in life, and we tell our truth. We defend the truth that makes most sense to us, which is different from telling the truth, no matter what. That can get you in trouble. But the reason we can trust Jesus with our devotion is because he told the truth. In the end we trust people who tell the truth – even when it is a truth we don't really want to hear.

Jesus was impatient. Jesus wanted to promote change right now.

Among the Jews of Jesus' times there were two groups of people. Some were waiting for the Messiah. They believed that they must remain faithful and wait for God to come and save them. These people put their faith in a messiah who would be a messenger from God. The Messiah would kick out

the Romans, and punish the unrighteous and put the Jews in charge. As they had been waiting for generations, they encouraged one another to be patient. God would come to save them if they waited.

There was a minority of Jews however who did not believe in waiting, John the Baptist was one of those who thought it was time to go to the desert and provoke the kingdom right here and now. Take action. Jesus was not in the patient camp; he was impatient. Some scholars have the theory that all the people living in Nazareth were part of one of those utopian communities that were striving to live their faith without distraction, and somehow bring God's kingdom here, today. Though Jesus grew up in Nazareth, he left his own enclave to bring God's kingdom to everyone. He believed the kingdom of heaven was imminent, not in the future but here each day.

Jesus told his followers that heaven was not in the sky, but here on earth. If you want to know God's kingdom look at the little children in your village and begin to see the word through their eyes. If you want to know God just look around at the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and you will find inspiration. You don't have to wait for God. God is here, if you have the eyes to see Him.

Finally, Jesus was free. Jesus lived his whole life in occupied territory. He grew up in a nation which had been oppressed for over 500 years. The Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans had all had their way with this Israelite maid. The Romans were today's obscenity. Yet Jesus grew up in their world, never left it and yet was not bound by it.

Jesus knew that any Roman soldier with a hot temper could flatten you with the back of his hand just because he felt like it. Yet he advised people to spit on this practice. He was a Mediterranean peasant in a land where Roman soldiers could force you to carry their pack, and you had no choice but to do as you were bidden. But he told people to undermine their cruel ways. Jesus lived in a rural community where people lived like serfs on the brink of economic disaster anytime the weather was

fickle or the crops poor. So anyone might be forced to use the clothes on their back for collateral on a loan. But he showed his followers how to expose their barbarity.

Jesus never was a victim. He never allowed the system to penetrate his own soul and psyche. In the depth of his heart and mind he was free. The rules of oppressors are truly diabolical because they are intended to break your spirit. They are intended to make you feel subservient. Jesus never did. Why?

Jesus had this genius for living in an occupied territory but never succumbing to the sense of being subjugated. He had no money but he never felt poor. He dwelt among the most humble people on earth, but he carried himself with a bearing which soared above all the distinctions of class or nation. He died young, but his life was so profoundly experienced in the communities that loved him that his presence was arguably more powerfully real after his death than before.

Today, we are celebrating our 25 year partnership with the people in the village of Santa Maria Tzeja. The genius of the project is that the leaders have tried hard to avoid a role as benevolent sponsors of change. Instead as a church we have shaped a program built on mutual friendship and human community. The notion of treating an oppressed people in a third World country with dignity has proved deeply subversive. In a world defined by class and economic distinctions our church has strived to forge a friendship between cosmopolitan suburbanites in the First world and rural villagers in the Third World.

By refusing to see the villagers as less than us we have strived to break the bonds of economic servitude and political servitude under which so many people in Third World countries labor. In some ways it is simple- like the apparent kindness in Matthew 5, but in truth anytime you speak the truth, and live impatient for justice, we change the world. We demonstrate God's intention for life.

Welcome –

Whoever, wherever

Special welcome to John Allen – student at Union – Amanda Kistler, Randall Shea – Principal of the Middle School in the village and his 2 daughters –

Yesterday - -

Alan Clayton-Matthews- Stewardship Moment -