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ACTING OUT THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Many Jews in the first century longed for a figure like Judas Maccabeus to lead Israel out of oppression by foreign powers. In one way, Jesus fits right into the context of first-century messianic expectation. He too is announcing the inauguration of the decisive moment of history in which God is finally dealing climactically with Roman oppression. But implicit in Jesus' summons is a warning to abandon other visions. If Israel persists in its determination to fight a desperate war against Rome, then Rome will destroy them. This would be seen by many as a sign of God's judgment against his rebellious people. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' plan for creating a renewed Israel—for overcoming the kingdoms of Herod and Caesar without using violence and without simply allowing themselves to be dominated. Jesus will himself lead the way in carrying this vision through to fulfillment in surprising and unanticipated ways.

To illustrate Jesus' alternative way between violent revolt and passive acquiescence, I use the work of Walter Wink (*The Powers That Be:*

Theology for a New Millennium [New York: Doubleday, 1999]). I ask for three groups of volunteers to act out or mime Wink's background descriptions of the Sermon on the Mount as I summarize them to the class. The class enjoys the humor and energy which the mime brings as it vividly illustrates Jesus' "third way" of launching the kingdom of heaven on earth. What follows is the synopsis of Wink's analysis, which the students act out while I narrate:

Act One: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." The best translation of "do not resist" is "don't react violently against the one who is evil." That is, don't oppose evil on its terms. Don't let evil dictate the methods of opposition.

Don't imagine a blow with your right fist. This is not a fight among equals, but a blow by a superior at an inferior. It is the domination system forcing someone out of line to get back into their place. It is a backhand blow. And if you stand up to it, it's like telling the same joke twice—if it didn't cower you the first time, it simply will not work. Sure, the left cheek would be a target for the right fist, but only equals fight with fists. Last thing master wants to do is establish the underling's equality. You can have the slave beaten, but no longer can you simply make him cower. The point is made: "I am a human being, just like you. I refuse to be treated this way. It's wrong." This is not passivity. It is not saying, "Go ahead, hit me again." It is an assertive, non-violent challenge to the domination system.

Act Two: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." The setting is a law court. The biblical context is Deut 4:10–13 which provides that a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer robe, but it had to be returned each evening so the poor man would have something in which to sleep.

Upon losing one's land, as many had, you sell your labor to an absentee landowner who bought your land. You rent your former land from him, still borrow to pay for food for your family, and thus you can get into the collateral system. They hate this system. Jesus says next time they ask for your outer coat, give them your cloak as well, that is, give them the equivalent of your underwear. This means marching out of the court naked. Nakedness is taboo, and viewing the naked party is a cause of shame for the creditor. So the debtor thus brings shame on the creditor. In effect, the poor man turns the tables, pushing the whole system to its absurd conclusion. He raises a stunning protest against the system that created his debt: "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body." The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. It is a disgrace. His nakedness lays bare the whole injustice of this oppressive system.

Act Three: "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." Compulsory labor was a feature of Roman rule. You could be coerced into service by Roman soldiers, but it was relatively civilized in that the basic rule was that they could take you or your oxen for a single mile as a levy on subject people. There is evidence of whole villages fleeing to avoid being forced to carry soldiers' baggage when they are moving camp and the locals get wind of it.

What we overlook here is that carrying the pack a second mile is an infraction of the military code. Now such infractions would be under control of the commander. Such a soldier who breaks this code could be flogged, fined, given short rations, or imprisoned for a week, or perhaps just reprimanded, depending on the seriousness of the offense.

Jesus does not counsel revolt. He does not trick the soldier by pretending to be a friend, and then slit his throat when he's not looking. Carrying a pack a second mile is a strategy for the dominated to recover their dignity and take initiative in a non-violent way. So imagine the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reaches for his pack reluctantly and the civilian says, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." Why? What's he up to? Normally, Romans have to coerce and threaten. But this Jew is cheerfully going another mile? What's going on? An insult to the soldier's manhood and strength? Being kind?

Whereas once the Jew was in a state of servile oppression, he has now seized the initiative. This throws the soldier off balance. Never before has he had this problem. If he previously enjoyed feeling superior, he certainly won't today. Imagine the humor of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give him back his pack! The humor would not have escaped Jesus' contemporaries. Certainly this could be used in a vindictive way, so we must not forget the sermon also commands us to love the enemy. But for one moment at least, it is no fun to be an oppressor. Of course, this would only work once, and people would probably catch on. So one must improvise new tactics to keep the opponent off balance. Here is a way to resist the powers and principalities without being made over into their likeness.

I have students discuss in groups their response to this re-telling of the story. After some time passes, I put on an overhead the passage from John (18:19) where Jesus is struck on the face and then responds in a way which does not literally turn the other cheek and simply suffer in silence. He stands straight up in a non-violent way and challenges this miscarriage of justice. This is Jesus' subversive battle plan to recreate the heart of Israel from within.

Finally, I ask students to consider how (or whether) Jesus' eschatological message still has relevance today. After discussion of events in the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., its contemporary relevance

seems more apparent than before we began our study of the Sermon on the Mount. (For other exercises involving role-play, see §§72, 91, 142, 161, 195, 199, 203, 241, 246, 265.)

Roger Newell