

Confronting Evil

The ethical task of our time is how to overcome EVIL without becoming EVIL ourselves and creating new forms of EVIL. Nonviolence has never been more relevant. The world has never been more ready.

Jesus couldn't have told us not to resist evil. He always resisted it, and taught his disciples to do the same. So what is he saying? Nature has provided us with two instinctive ways to deal with violence: flight or fight. Jesus articulates a new response to evil, a third way, contrary to nature: a path of nonviolence that can end our penchant for violence. Jesus gives three examples of what he means.

1. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek,

turn the other also." Most people probably think of a right hook here, but a right hook would hit the left cheek. A left hook would strike the right cheek, but in Jesus' day the left hand was reserved for unclean tasks. Even to gesture with the left hand in a Semitic society would bring shame on the one doing so. The only conceivable blow would be the back of the right hand. This is not a blow to injure, but to humiliate. It was always a "one down" blow by a "superior" to an "inferior": husband to wife, parent to child, master to servant, Roman to Jew. By turning the other cheek, the inferior is saying, "I refuse to be humiliated by you. I am a human being, a child of God. You can kill me, but my soul is out of your reach." This reaction is light years from the passive acquiescence ascribed to Jesus all these centuries.

2. "If a creditor takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give him your undergarment as well."

The issue is collateral for a loan. Normally one gives as pledge his movable property, such as animals; then one's home; finally one's very clothing. The law allowed for a creditor to take the long cloak that was used as one's overcoat by day, but he had to return it for use as a blanket by night. Enter the Romans. Wealthy Romans hated to pay taxes, and tried to hide their wealth in border provinces where books might not be so carefully kept. But land was passed from father to elder son; how to get it out of the hands of the peasants? By charging exorbitant interest - 25 to 250 percent. At such rates, foreclosure was speedy. Jesus deals with this problem. The poor person will never win the case in court, since the laws have been drawn up by the rich. So here's what the peasant can do. When they force him to surrender his outer garment, he should give his undergarment as well. This would leave the debtor naked! And in Judaism, it is often not the person who is naked but the one who beholds the other's nakedness who is shamed.

What we have here, then, is burlesque, guerrilla theater, striptease. The poor man says, in effect, "You want my cloak? Then take everything I've got." This is spiritual jujitsu, where you use the momentum of the opponent to throw him.

3. "If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, Carry it two." All Roman roads had mile markers, and Roman soldiers were allowed to make civilians carry their packs one mile, but no more. More than that would incur punishment under military law. So, Jesus tells his hearers, when a soldier forces you to carry his pack a mile, carry it a second. This puts the soldier on the defensive. He cannot fathom why you are doing this. The question, again, is how the oppressed can recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. Normally, soldiers had to coerce people to carry their packs, but this Jew does so cheerfully, and will not stop! Is this a provocation? Is he insulting the legionnaire's strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to violate the rules of impressment? Will this civilian file a complaint?

From a situation of galling conscription, the oppressed have suddenly seized the initiative. They have taken back the power of choice. Imagine the situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give back his pack! The humor of this scene may have escaped us all these years, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers.

To those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe before their masters, Jesus offers a way to liberate themselves from servile actions and a servile mentality. And he asserts that they can do this before the revolution.

They can begin to behave with dignity and re-covered humanity now, even under the unchanged conditions of the old order. It is possible to create the shell of a new society within the crumbling shell of the old order.

It's Happening Now

This is not pie-in-the-sky utopianism. It was enacted just over two decades ago in Poland. In 1980, workers in the shipyards of Gdansk organized a union, Solidarity, independent of the communist unions. It was so successful that the communist regime declared martial law in 1981, effectively outlawing it. The whole Western press concluded that Solidarity was dead. But when the overconfident communist rulers called for elections almost a decade later, suddenly Solidarity reemerged in full force, winning all 98 seats that were contested.

Solidarity wasn't dead; it had simply gone underground, establishing its own universities and secondary schools, clandestine poetry readings, concerts, ceremonies, co-ops, and labor organizing, operating secretly in homes and churches. They had simply built within the rotting shell of the communist state a new, vibrant shell. In the words of the Czech Vaclav Havel, they had decided to begin living the truth, even under a lying regime. That victory of nonviolence was replicated just in 1989-90 in more than 14 nations. If we add other nonviolent revolutions in the last half of the twentieth century, there were 3.3 billion people involved in nonviolent struggles, almost all of which were successful. Nonviolence works in smaller conflicts as well. Precisely because evolution has not prepared us for nonviolence, it is important that we rehearse stories of nonviolence that can help us come up with new applications. Here are two.

The Power of Many

Nurses at a hospital in Saskatchewan were being bullied by doctors in front of colleagues, visitors, and patients. Finally they took their problem to the administration. Together they worked out this scheme. Next time a doctor jumped on a nurse publicly, the hospital would send out a "pink alert." Nurses who were free from duty would converge on the spot and surround the doctor, holding hands. The first time it was tried, the doctor tried to break out of the circle, but he found himself unable to do so. It became like the children's game Red Rover. The doctor began running at what looked like the weakest nurse, only to find the entire circle giving way, like a giant amoeba. Finally, he conceded defeat and apologized. It was not necessary to repeat the exercise.

The Power of One

This boy was the smallest in his class, and he had chronic sinusitis. His nose was always running. On his school bus there was a bully who was terrorizing everyone. Finally, one day, the little kid had had it. Blowing a load of snot into his right hand, he approached the bully, his hand out. "I want to shake the hand of a real bully," he said. The bully backed up until he reached the back of the bus, where he sat down and never bothered anyone again. That nose was always at the ready! The boy found his strength in his greatest weakness. The very thing he hated most about himself had become the source of his power. There are many such stories, and we need to tell them to each other, so that we begin to recognize the resources of strength available to us. This is the way violence can be overcome without creating new forms of violence.

Jesus did not teach nonresistance. Rather, he disavowed violent resistance in favor of nonviolent resistance. Of course we must resist evil! No decent human being could conceivably stand by and watch innocents suffer without trying to do something to save them. The question is simply one of means. The world is ready to embrace nonviolence both as strategy and as a way of life.