

February 20, 2011
Epiphany 7, Year A
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you look at the Arab world these days and insist upon finding Western operatives mostly responsible for the remarkable, mostly non-violent uprisings; if you can't believe that Arabs and Muslim culture are capable of non-violent, democratic activity (and I've encountered that opinion directly and in the media); or, to put it another way, if you feel compelled to find a contemporary Lawrence of Arabia to explain the success of the protestors in the street; then, one of your top candidates might be Gene Sharp. But he has pointedly refused to take any credit. The courage is in the streets. The word "courage" comes from the Latin "cor," meaning heart. I see passion and hope in the streets. I see people living from their hearts.

I'd not heard of Gene Sharp until I read Thursday's Times, which had a headline: "Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution."¹ The reporter wrote, "Stoop-shouldered and white-haired at 83, [Sharp] grows orchids, has yet to master the internet, and hardly seems a dangerous man." But working out of a "cluttered brick row house in a working-class neighborhood" of Boston, Sharp has rankled authoritarian regimes for decades, be it Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, the ruling military junta in Burma, the theocrats in Iran, despots who don't appear to care how their people live, despots seemingly void of empathy, of living from the heart.

Many consider Gene Sharp to be the father of the study of strategic nonviolent action. Democracy activists all over the world have read Sharp's works, like "198 Methods of Nonviolent Action." The Egyptian protestors read Sharp, and their movement impressed Sharp by their discipline in remaining peaceful despite strong provocation and also by their lack of fear. Sharp said, "If people are not afraid of the dictatorship, that dictatorship is in big trouble."

He has studied Gandhi, Thoreau, and King. He has examined scores of nonviolent uprisings. He has concluded that peaceful protest is the most effective way to combat despots, not because using violence diminishes one's moral standing, but because using violence plays to the strength of despots. "If you fight with violence," Sharp said, "you are fighting with your enemy's best weapon."

In today's gospel, Jesus teaches us not to use evil to resist evil. This teaching inspired Gandhi and King. Jesus tells us not to retaliate with physical force. This does not mean roll over and be a doormat. This does not mean be an enabler to the person treating you poorly. Rather, he's saying break the cycle. The true way to resist violence and evil is not to play the same game as your opponent. Don't play to his strength. The most radical way to resist evil is to attack the underlying hate and contempt and cruelty by not returning it. Truly resisting evil requires a creative, imaginative response. It's not acting according to our impulsive, animal self.

Of course, when someone punches us, attacks us, be it physically or emotionally, our instinctive reaction is to attack back or to run away. But Jesus says, "Stand in there. Take it. Don't play tit for tat. Rise above it." What Jesus directs us to do requires courage, creativity, self-control, even empathy for your attacker. That's why he tells us to pray when someone is giving us a hard time. Pray. Connect with God. Renew your sense of self as God's child.

It's difficult for me to hear this. It's completely counter to my most immediate instincts, my desire to be a tough guy, a protector, especially in trying circumstances. But as I read the gospels, I find Jesus is always challenging my gut impulses, my norms, shaking up conventional wisdom. Indeed, today he's even contradicting parts of the Jewish Law, parts of the Bible. "You have heard it said..., but I say unto you." He's saying to us, "This is your world, but it's not mine. This is the way you live, but it's not the way I live. It's not the way God is. Live out your God given identity. Live to others the way God lives to you."

We can approach today's gospel as Jesus laying out impossible rules for living, as pie-in-the-sky standards, as hopelessly idealistic and naïve given the complexity and evil in the world. But lingering in the back of our mind may be a fear that God really is going to judge us on these terms, and it will depress us, discourage us, and it'll give us another reason not to take today's gospel seriously.

Today's gospel ends with Jesus telling us to be perfect as God is perfect. The translation can be misleading. It is better understood as Jesus encouraging us to grow up, to mature in godliness, treating others, and treating ourselves, as generously and graciously as God treats us.

Jesus does not give us what seem like impossible laws - turning the other cheek, loving our enemies - to make us feel bad about ourselves, to make us feel inadequate, hopeless, lost forever. Rather, he's saying, "This is the

ultimate reality. This is the way the Kingdom of God is, the way God lives, and you – the children of God – this is what you’re becoming. So live like it now.”

But it’s so different than our immediate impulse. If we have an enemy, we want to eliminate them. Jesus says, “Love them. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.” Sometimes we do that. And isn’t that what we’ve seen happen in Egypt, that the despot brought out in his people astonishing cooperation, self-restraint, peacefulness, sacrifice, courage, care for one another? Through recent decades, isn’t that what we’ve seen in Central Europe, in South Africa, in Portugal, in Ukraine, in the Philippines, indeed in our own country too as it struggled against Jim Crow?

There’s the way of God and the way of the world, two visions for life, and they clash inside our culture, and inside each of us. For example, if we see a stranger, an unattractive part of us gets spooked, worrying that the stranger might get something of mine, feeling that the stranger threatens me in some way. Let’s leave him on the outside. Jesus says, “Welcome him. Make friends.”

If someone sues us, we get the best lawyer we can and fight. Jesus says, “Give him what he wants, and more.” If someone hurts us, part of us wants revenge. Jesus says, “Pray for them. Remember let God rule in you. You’re part of his Kingdom.” We do live like this sometimes. It requires us to take some risk, to have an openness of heart, to be vulnerable.

What we need to live as God lives is empathy, that is trying to understand how another person experiences life, imagining another’s reality. Isn’t that part of what communion is all about? God joining himself to us, living in us, knowing us – in the fullness of that word “know.” God knows and experiences the reality of each of us. He’s there with us in it. A godly life involves being able to understand another person, to empathize with another.

Some years back, the Department of Youth Services (the DYS) in Massachusetts began to use more nonprofits to provide social services – halfway houses, group homes, outpatient counseling, job centers.² Instead of providing these services directly, DYS paid the nonprofits to do it. Contracting this way required DYS to adapt, and this was a significant problem for the head of accounting. He was known as Attila the Accountant, a real stickler for the rules. If you submitted a request for payment or reimbursement, everything had to be perfect. If a minor detail was missing on your forms, then there’d be no payment.

This was a serious problem for the nonprofits. If they didn’t dot all the ‘i’s and cross all the ‘t’s, they didn’t get their check, and then they couldn’t make

payroll or they would have to cut services. Attila would never give the nonprofits a break. It caused great distress and hurt nonprofit staffs and the kids they served. The DYS bosses couldn't reason with Attila. So the bosses had Attila join them on road trip to visit their providers.

Attila saw that many of the providers worked out of old houses in troubled neighborhoods. The offices were dilapidated, the atmosphere chaotic. The typical nonprofit staffer was obviously working hard and not making much money. They worked in noisy, tumultuous houses with kids coming and going, hanging out, playing music. Amid the constant distractions, staffers tried to care for the kids, to make sure they got to school, or to the doctor, or to the job interview.

Attila recognized that when he didn't get a check to one of these places, they'd have to cancel a doctor's appointment for a kid, to serve less food at meals, to send kids into the cold without a proper jacket. Or, the nonprofit would be late with payroll, and the staffer who was living check to check would suffer. Attila felt empathy. He got to see how his nitpicking, his focus on details, not the big picture, not on what really matters, was hurting people. He came back from the road trip a different man, committed to a bigger purpose: serving kids, not serving details. The journey had transformed him.

Attila's experience of someone else's reality helped him to see himself more clearly and to connect with a bigger purpose. It must have hurt him, seeing his pettiness, how he had been wrong, how he had hurt others. It changed him. It opened his heart. He connected with other people. Opening our hearts, being vulnerable, feeling empathy - it's risky business. Yet it's the path to fuller life, to a greater sense of God's love for us.

What is Jesus really doing? The way the Church and Christians behave sometimes you'd think that Jesus was mostly about making rules, fretting the details, keeping people in line, giving us certainty to say that I'm different than you, better than you. We can use God and Jesus against one another.

But today's gospel is all about Jesus saying that what's more important than being right, more important than being better than others, is your relationship to other people. That's what gives us true life. Someone may treat us poorly, but that doesn't have to bring out what's ugly in us. It can show us at our best, working for peace and reconciliation, building relationships, acting with courage and hope, opening our hearts, living from our hearts.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Shy U.S. Intellectual Created Playbook Used in a Revolution," The New York Times, February 17, 2011, p. A01.

² Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Switch*, Broadway Books (2010), pp. 115–118.