

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I do not care how old or how young you are, because it is absolutely certain that you have done this as a youngster and remember it (or not), or you have seen it yourself of your children or your grandchildren. In the car. In your backyard. At the playground. At Sylvan Beach during the summer. On Christmas morning around the tree. On some family picnic someplace. In the school yard where you teach.

Two elementary-aged children get into it. They get restless. Someone starts calling the other one names, or just looks at them wrong...in the opinion of the second one. One starts rough-housing, gives the second a shove, or push, or trip. The second pushes back...and it gets going. The yelling starts, and the crying. As the busy adult present, you get distracted by the noise in the back seat...and call a stop to the whole thing. If that does not work, if you are driving the car, you pull over to “officiate”. And, what do you hear??

“That’s not fair! He started it!!” Really. Who has not been there and done that?

You might think that, on becoming adults, we would have a better handle on conflict. You may know..or not know...that I am a National Hockey League, Buffalo Sabres fan...so, during the televised broadcasts that I am able to watch, the announcers almost invariably proclaim that, when an offending player goes to the penalty box, he is usually the second person involved. Someone committed what he thought was a penalty offense against him, but the referees missed it and the offender got away with it...so he retaliates and, as you might suspect, the original victim who retaliates almost always gets caught by the official, and is sent to the penalty box. The sin bin. And I will bet, on their slow skate to the box, they are almost always complaining to the official: “He started it. It’s not fair!”

We have all experienced this sort of escalating pettiness, and should readily admit that it is silly. We all do it. Instead of using boys’ names out on the playground, such as “Billy” and “Joey”, we could insert the words, “husband” and “wife”. Or we could insert the names of two rival high schools. Two rival companies. “Hatfields” and “McCoys.” Republicans and Democrats. “Pro-life” and “Pro-choice.” Israeli and Palestinian.

We all do it. Conflict at any level is conflict. If it is not preventable, most conflict is at least resolvable...but not until one side refuses to retaliate and instead decides to reconcile. And...to do that, one side must stop the retaliation. To end the warring, one side must be willing to say “No more..that is enough!” And, of course, it is a risk. Billy might take another punch. A spouse might hurl another insult. Nations might drop another bomb...continuing the status quo of our youth...it is not fair, he started it.

In what we call “the Sermon on the Mount”, the only sermon Jesus preached that we have record of, are filled with some beautiful passages that comfort and encourage us. But they also contain some harsh commands. Impossible expectations, such as “Do not hate your enemies, love them”, and “Do not judge people”, and “Your anger is just as serious as murder.” Jesus had to have known that just about everything he would say would contradict the status quo...perhaps no more true than in the words that stand before us today:

You have heard it said “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

But I say to you “Do not resist an evil-doer.”

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;
if anyone wants to take your coat, give him your over coat.

If any of Caesar’s guards require you to carry a load,
carry it farther than they ask.

And if someone asks you for a loan, make it a gift.

How radical was that?? In the Old Testament, the law of the land was equal retaliation. If someone took your cow, you could rightfully take his lamb. If your fence was broken by your adversary, you did not ask him to repair it or go to court...you simply broke his fence in return. If a neighbor boy threw a rock and took out your child’s tooth, you were obligated to knock out the tooth of the other kid.

That was the legal system. That was defined justice, because that was elementary fairness.

In that day, if someone wanted to insult another person, he would use the back of his hand. If the offended person showed any reaction, the next blow came with the palm or the fist. Turning the other cheek sent the message that the offended person would not be fighting back, so when Jesus said these words it must have stunned his hearers. “What do you mean, Jesus? Are we just supposed to take it? Just let people hit us, and boss us, and steal from us?” The radical implication of his words is “yes.”

The paradigm shift of direction to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us is moving away from the retribution foundation in fairness to the righteousness of God in justice. Jesus hopes to move us from a world of fairness to one of justice....the difference found in righteousness.

By the turning of the cheek, we learn that God’s righteousness is not about retaliation and revenge. By the command of giving away your coat, we learn that God’s righteousness is tempered by mercy. By the urging to go the second mile, God’s righteousness seems to include generosity and grace.

As parents, we have tried to teach our children the difference between fairness and justice. A toddler takes a toy from your five-year-old, who cries, “It’s not fair”. And she is right: it is not fair. But while it is not fair that the five-year-old hand over the toy, it is right to do so because the toddler does not yet understand fairness and sharing. The older child begins to learn that justice is fairness, but tempered by love...and she begins to learn about God’s righteousness.

As radical as it was then, it may be more so today. Rarely, if ever, does anyone turn the other cheek in this competitive, conflicted world of ours. Road rage committed by a grandfather, causing the death of a Syracuse area driver, sends him to prison for the rest of his life. Babies are shot to death in car safety seats as tragic innocents in the middle of gang, warfare violence. The noise and utter lack of civility that increasingly passes for political campaigns in this county continues to drive lower voter interest and activity, while increasing gratuitous chatter from the pundits how badly we all need to get along. And in family and divorce courts, the total-war mentality of spouses and enabling lawyers who will stop at nothing...reminds me of Pilate, trying to wash the blood off of his hands.

You tell me....do we like it like this? Do we like being in conflict with neighbors, or spouses, or nations or adversaries? Do we enjoy the bickering and fighting? If we say that we do not, that we do not really like it, then why do we do it?!?!? Continue to fight and attack and insult and avenge?

Because he hit me first. Because she started it. Because it's their fault.

When we look at the condition of our lives and of our world, we should not be stunned by Jesus' words of non-violence...but instead we should be amazed that he warned us and we never listened. If just once, someone would stand up and say "Enough! No more fighting!" perhaps then the cycle would end, and peace would evolve. The Garden of Eden that God intended for us in the first place. But we do not know...because no nation, no neighbor, no politician, no Billy or Joey has ever had the courage to say "no more."

Only one person did...right to the end. Right to his final words on the cross. "Forgive them"

Pastor Gordon MacDonald has said this: "The world can do almost anything as well or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace."

Imagine how the world would be if just the Christians stopped fighting. Think of what our neighborhoods would look like, or our churches, or our families, or our political arenas, if the followers of Christ turned the other cheek whenever possible. What if the hearts and minds of two billion Christians transformed to the call of Jesus toward God's love and kindness and grace, and began to live our lives in that way?

Better yet, let us start with the one we see in the mirror. That is a good place to begin. So then, when your Joey is punched by their Billy, you do not call the police or your lawyer or threaten that neighbor, but instead suggest everyone go to a Syracuse Crunch or a Utica Comets hockey game as a start to getting along better. At the game with the neighbor and his bully kid Billy, you can hear the penalized player going to the penalty box yell at the referee that "he started it"...and say to yourself, "Yup, he started it alright, on the cross and in the full righteousness of our loving God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.