

“Living Foolishly”
Matthew 5:38-42
The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2023
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This is not my ideal sermon or the ideal text this week. I would have loved a nice, pleasant, easy lectionary text. A text where we could have talked about new beginnings as a community. A text that would allow us all to excitedly dream together and look forward in hopeful anticipation. I really would have preferred a text that made it seem a little easier to follow the way of Jesus, that didn't ask for so much. I really would have preferred not to have this text, on this week of all weeks as war is raging in Palestine and Israel, as antisemitism and islamophobia are surging here in our own country.

SFBC, we are “a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ, to be a people of God, and to love and care for our neighbors...to know no circles of exclusion, no bridges we will not cross, and no loyalties above those that we owe to God.”

And so, today, we are going to talk about peace. Radical peace and nonviolent resistance. Turning the other cheek. Because we have to, because it is what Jesus calls us to, because at some point we have to start living into radical peace and nonviolent resistance because the death must end. War must end. Violence must end. The notion that we are owed revenge and retribution when we are “wronged,” is not just killing Palestinians and Israelis right now, it is killing all of us. What kills one precious, sacred, beloved child of God, kills us all.

Which is why Jesus in his sermon on the mount says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: do not violently resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Jesus is referencing here the “law of retaliation” which is mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. This law was actually originally intended to limit violence: an eye for an eye instead of two eyes for an eye. No more than one eye for an eye—checking the uncontrolled violence that was common. Essentially, it was a progressive law but the core belief remained: the way to respond to someone who has harmed you is with violent retaliation.

Here, Jesus is directly speaking against harmful religious laws and the laws of empire to a people living in an empire-occupied land. He does this throughout his Sermon on the Mount, and it's shocking. One of my preaching professors from divinity school, Charles L. Campbell, or “Chuck” as we all call him, says this in his book *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, “The sermon on the Mount is so startling—it seems so foolish—because it offers a vision of an alternative world. It is an odd world that runs center to the conventions, rationalities, and myths of Jesus' day—and of our own...Socially, politically, religiously, and economically, Jesus proclaims a world turned upside down and inside out. The sermon seeks to disorient and dislocate the hearers. Like a fool, it shocks us out of our common-sense, taken-for-granted

assumptions so we might see the world differently and possibly glimpse the new creation that has interrupted the world in Jesus himself.”¹

Because of the foolish nature of the sermon, interpreters, preachers, and readers have often tried to explain away certain parts of the sermon to absolve ourselves of taking Jesus’ words seriously and following them literally. For example, until divinity school and reading books like Chuck’s, the most common interpretation I knew of “turning the other cheek” was because it was an offensive gesture in first century Jewish culture to be slapped with the back of the right hand, so if you “turned the other cheek” it is impossible to be slapped again. This makes the entire point of turning the other cheek to be shaming the slapper, which is vengeful in its own way. And if the text is interpreted that way, it lets all of us off the hook. It places it in some historical ambiguity, so that we do not actually have to seek peace and nonviolently resist. But, what if we started literally, or materially, living into the foolishness of Jesus’ words here in the Sermon on the Mount and other prophetic, prescriptive words of Scripture?

Back in North Carolina, my husband, Keith decided to take the words of the prophet Isaiah literally, “...they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.”² He along with the two congregations he pastored, began to imagine a world with no more guns, with no more weapons. Even though in the United States, guns are idols. Even though we think we need them to protect ourselves or maybe we don’t think we need them, but we really would prefer that police officers have them to keep us “safe.”

So they bought a saw and began to chop up donated guns to turn them into gardening tools. I volunteered at a safe-surrender event Keith organized, where folks could drive through and donate their unwanted guns. These guns might be inherited guns that they’ve never known what to do with, but they might also be guns that people used to commit violence, cause harm, or even kill. I was operating one of the saws, and the first gun I cut was a shotgun. As I chopped and the sparks flew, I thought about how foolish this must seem, chopping up a gun so that it can become a gardening tool and help someone to grow vegetables in their garden. As I chopped, I thought of what that gun would have been able to do, what it would have been able to take, harm, oppress, and the violence it could have caused. As I worked with the saw, slowly but surely cutting it into pieces, it became nothing more than a pile of scrap metal.

Later in the day, we all collectively participated in turning the chopped-up guns into gardening tools that will help new life spring up from the ground. A blacksmith led us all in beating swords into plowshares. Together on that day we participated in radical peacemaking and nonviolent resistance, loudly proclaiming that guns or any other weapon of any kind, have not, are not, and will not save us.

¹ Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Fools*, 119.

² Isaiah 2:4, NRSVUE

Guns are idols. War is an idol. Violence is an idol. War will not save us. Violence will not save us. War begets war. Violence begets violence. Death begets death. And the cycle continues on and on and on because we think it is our right, or even our duty, to respond, to lash back with equal or greater force when we are wronged or harmed because it is a lie that the empire has taught us, encouraged and shown us and has said that anything to the contrary is foolish. And this lie, this thing that we think is a human right is killing all of us even if we don't realize it. Guns and bombs and drones will never bring peace. Revenge will never bring peace. Violence will never bring peace. War will never bring peace. It will not and cannot save us.

I want to make a few things clear before I say what I am about to say, and make clear what I mean by the words that I use.

First and foremost, let me say: antisemitism is on the rise in the wake of the Hamas attacks on Israelis both here in the United States and in other parts of the world. I lament the fear and pain that many of our Jewish siblings everywhere are living in. Islamophobia is also on the rise, as we saw with the 6-year-old Palestinian-American Muslim boy who was stabbed to death in Chicago for being a Palestinian Muslim. Every human life is precious and sacred. Every human being is a child of God beloved by God. Any violent attack on any human being in any capacity is unacceptable.

All Palestinians are not Hamas. Hamas is not all Palestinians. Not all Jewish people are Israeli, and not all Israeli people are Jewish.

So, when I say the "Israeli government" or "Israel," I am specifically referring to the Israeli government and the modern nation state of Israel that is a settler colonial state that occupies and has occupied Palestine, enacting apartheid for the last 75 years. When I use these terms, I do not mean all Israeli people, and I certainly do not mean all Jewish people. In this instance, I do not mean "Israel" and "Jews" as synonyms.

According to the United Nations International Convention on and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, apartheid is "inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them." This is what the modern nation state of Israel has done to Palestine. For 75 years, the Israeli government has systemically oppressed, dehumanized, and committed horrific acts of violence against Palestine. Conditions like these have led some extremist groups within Palestine, like Hamas, to violent retribution, as we saw with the acts of terror against Israeli civilians just weeks ago. And now, we are watching as bombs fall in a deluge onto Palestine while roads—routes of escape—have been closed off, food and medical supplies have been cut off. Palestinians are dying by the hundreds and thousands. And Israelis are also dying. Apartheid kills everyone. Violence kills everyone.

The United States is complicit in all of this, not only is the US government helping to spread misinformation accusing Palestinians of unproven atrocities, but our tax dollars go to help the military funding of Israel.

Pastor Anita and I were part of a Zoom call on Thursday afternoon with the Baptist Peace Fellowship, listening, learning, and asking questions about what to do. We heard from a Palestinian Baptist named G.J. Tarazi and he charged us to act, to speak up, to pursue radical peace and nonviolent resistance. G.J. said, “The Christian community in the world has to stop ignoring this situation. The Christian community—the followers of Jesus—have to make this a priority... We have to speak truth to power Christians! We have to follow Jesus, Christians! Where are you Christians?! What are you doing to make this happen? What are you doing to end the occupation?!..What are we doing as followers of Jesus? Are you brave enough to follow Jesus? Do you want peace and justice to come to the birthplace of our savior?”

It’s time to act. It’s time to speak out, to call our elected officials and demand that the US government stop providing military funding to Israel, and call for a ceasefire. It’s time to educate ourselves and listen to the voices of Palestinians and organizations like Jewish Voices for Peace who are working to enact peace through advocacy and nonviolent resistance. It is time to join peaceful protests.

It seems foolish, but the world does not have to be the way that it is. And at some point, someone, somewhere has to be the first one to turn the other cheek, to nonviolently resist. No matter how foolish it seems. No matter if the people around them scoff or mock, or encourage and goad (and even fund) a violent response. At some point, someone, somewhere has to start living into radical peace and nonviolent resistance.

We are a “community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ,” and the way of Jesus Christ is the foolish way. Living foolishly will cost us. When we live into the vision a world turned upside down and inside out, it will cost us. When we live into radical peace and nonviolent resistance, it will cost us. Jesus was killed because of his foolish ways. But, death did not and does not get the last word. Life wins out over death. Peace wins out over war. Love wins out over hate.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not violently resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”