

**Defiant Love**, Rob Gieselmann  
Epiphany 7A, Feb. 23, 2014

Preaching Joke – Never know what to say to the preacher on your way out of church, *especially* when the sermon – well, what shall we say? – *needed work*?

**Try these:**

- *Splendid! I particularly enjoyed the ending.*
- *Do you practice your delivery a great deal?*
- *It's a shame other people don't hear your sermons.*
- *I hope you are saving your sermons for your next parish.*
- *Where in the world did you learn to preach that way?*

In Robert Stone's recent novel, Death of the Black-haired Girl, Jo, a former nun, baptized a dying baby. Being **both** Catholic and a woman, baptizing the baby was an act of defiance. But Jo had to do it. No priest was available, death was imminent, and the parents begged Jo. Jo poured water from the thermos on the table beside the crib, into her hands, trying to warm it. She dribbled three shards of icy water onto the baby's head, in what she called a *viaticum*, Father, Son, Spirit.

The distraught mother sensed connection, sensed hope, in this pious act, and Lord knows, she needed hope, so she asked Jo to baptize her, too. Jo should have declined – but how could she? Now, with frigid holy water – blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – dripping off of the mother's head, Jo turned to the father, and asked him, *Sir?*

But Jo knew instinctively that baptism would lay the father down and out, so she quietly left, without waiting for his answer. Yes – an act filled with defiance, and equally, love and redemption.

\*Many acts of defiance are the embodiment of love and redemption.

Martin Luther King, Jr. may have been married to nonviolent resistance, but he was nothing if not defiant. In his most recent book, David and Goliath, Malcolm Gladwell claims King intentionally relied upon colleagues he knew would act deviously to get the job done.

Take Wyatt Walker – Walker's job in Birmingham was to find ways to taunt the white establishment - Sheriff Bull Connor – into misbehaving – King wanted the whole country to see exactly how badly southern whites treated southern blacks. Walker himself was no devotee to nonviolent resistance – One night, when three of them – Walker, King, and Fred Shuttlesworth - were leading a rally at the First Baptist Church of Birmingham – an angry white mob threatened to burn the church down with 1500 black people inside. King turned to Walker and Shuttlesworth, and said, *I think we need to hand ourselves over, to save these people*. At which point, Walker looked over at King and said to

himself – *This man is out of his ... mind.* Wyatt – a man who got the job done – wasn't some turn-the-other-cheek kind of guy – He wasn't interested in becoming a sacrificial lamb for the movement. Fortunately, he didn't have to. Federal marshals showed-up, and the white mob dispersed. But, and this is the question: is it possible to turn the other cheek **with** an ulterior motive??? Indeed, nonviolent, passive resistance standing alone was not King's objective – his objective was equality. Nonviolent passive resistance was his method.

Jo baptized a dying baby in an act of love – The objective was hope, but this hope required defiance. Ulterior motives, or perhaps complex motives – and aren't most of our motives complex, anyway?

Paul quoted the Old Testament Book of Proverbs when writing about being kind to your enemy:” If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; [22](#) For [then] you will heap burning coals on his head. Prov. 25:22; Romans.”

Theologian Walter Wink thinks Jesus told people to turn the other cheek **as** an act of defiance, as a means to an end. One cannot, Wink claims, turn the other cheek without forcing the aggressor to strike you – if he continues his aggression – with his fist, humiliating him, and not you. Likewise, handing your cloak over *with* your tunic would leave you standing naked, shaming your opponent far more than you.

Finally, going two miles rather than one with a Roman soldier – who in those days, had the legal right to demand one of you – would place the soldier in jeopardy of punishment. All defiant actions, with ulterior motives – And you have to ask, is this what Jesus really meant? Perhaps, but I'm not so sure. I think turning the other cheek **is** the objective, and not the means. I think Jesus was calling for something far more pure, something far more hopeful - But first let me say, Jesus was not telling people to remain in abusive relationships. Nor was he telling people not to protect themselves. Escaping slavery in 1850 *was* the moral choice. Defying Bull Connor *was* the moral choice. Baptizing a dying baby *was* the moral choice.

But – and perhaps this is what Jesus meant – there is a way in which love can behave, that is *more* spiritual than it is physical. That is *more* liberating than hard-earned justice. How will there ever be peace on earth if the Christian chooses vengeance over forgiveness, self-righteousness over love? Love – there it is; that's the word. Love: not the giddy feelings that an childish society calls love – But the **hard** love Paul urged on the Corinthians – The Corinthians were divided, retaliating against one another, unforgiving, and certainly not egalitarian. Paul chastised them for their infantile behavior, and then told them simply, *love does not demand its own way... love does not notice when others do it wrong... love is patient, love is kind.* Love, and isn't that what Jesus expects of Christians? A love that *will* compel acts of defiance, but just as often, will require you to walk away from your rights.

Why turn the other cheek? Because that is what love is and love does. Why forgive someone who has clearly wronged you? Because that is what love is and love does. Why give extra when asked? Because that is what love is and love does.

We talk quite a bit in the Episcopal Church about baptismal covenant – your promise to God – and all I can say is this: That covenant is your promise to God that you will live better than the rest, and that you will do better than the rest. And that means – you will love better than the rest. So yes – turn the other cheek.... Just because.