



## Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

Late one summer evening in Broken Bow, Nebraska, a weary truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop. The waitress had just served him when three tough looking, leather jacketed motorcyclists - of the Hell's Angels type - decided to give him a hard time. Not only did they verbally abuse him, one grabbed the beef burger off his plate, another took a handful of his chips, and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

How would you respond? Well, this trucker did not respond as one might expect. Instead, he calmly rose, picked up his bill, walked to the front of the room, put the bill and his money on the cash register, and went out the door. The waitress followed him to put the money in the till and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night.

When she returned, one of the bikers said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?" She replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure ain't much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the car park."

Jesus said: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat let him have your shirt as well."

This is how grace plays itself out in our lives. But, not everyone pays attention. Last Sunday as we were preparing for communion we took time to consider God's amazing grace for us. I like to try and keep our three communion services together and so this morning as we come to the table we will be checking that after we allowed ourselves to understand God's grace last week, we will be checking to see how do we allow it to work itself out in our lives.

Not long after the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, someone installed fifteen wooden crosses, each eight feet tall, side by side on a hill near Columbine High School. Each of these crosses bore the name of one of the persons who died at the school. Thirteen of these crosses were for the victims. Two were for the perpetrators themselves.

People came to these stark wooden crosses in droves: to grieve, to remember, to lay flowers, to burn candles, and to leave messages. Shortly after these fifteen crosses were set into position on that Colorado hillside, the father of one of the victims took matters into his own hands. In great grief and anger, he pulled down the crosses for Eric and Dylan, the two boys who had killed thirteen of the other children, as others stood by watching. These two crosses were then removed from the hillside. As a compromise, a man from Illinois later proposed to set up two new crosses for Eric and Dylan, in a place quite separate from the other thirteen crosses. But the irate father said, "Under no circumstances should you honour these murderers. If he puts them up again, I will take them down [again]."

I know what you're thinking...those are all Americans. They tend to be more on the aggressive side. We Ulster men and women just fume on the inside. We won't get even,

we'll just keep score. As Stephen Leacock put it: I owe my teachers a lot, and I mean to pay them back some day! Or we'd rather keep our feelings to ourselves, even if those feelings show up as ulcers, high blood pressure and heart conditions. And when we do express ourselves, we'll do it quietly.

We get mad at the Church; we'll get even by leaving.  
We want to get even with our spouse; we'll give them the silent treatment.  
We want to teach our children a lesson; we'll leave them out of the will.  
We have a right to do what we want, don't we?  
Don't we have a right to retaliate?

Jesus moves us beyond the question of OUR RIGHT to retaliate to the issue of making THE RIGHT response. The response of grace. On this day of grace in our Church's calendar, Jesus himself gives some illustrations from his time that would have struck his original listeners as being humorous.

First, the saying about turning the other cheek. Matthew writes "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek" In that day one would always strike with the right hand. Using your right hand, try to strike someone on their right cheek. The action that works best is a slap, very much like how you would shoo away a fly. To strike someone with a closed fist, or an open-handed slap, one would hit the left cheek. A backhand slap was meant to demean or humiliate. One only did this to those considered inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves, husbands backhanded wives, adults backhanded children, Romans backhanded Jews.

Why would Jesus advise people who were already humiliated to turn the other cheek? Because this robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. It says, "Try again. You have failed to humiliate me. If you are going to strike me, treat me as an equal. Here is my left cheek, have a crack at it."

What happens is that suddenly, the aggressor is no longer in a position of power. Understood this way, "turning the other cheek" is not to let another walk all over you; just the opposite. It was a non-violent response, but it was not passive. It did not return the other's hatred, but resisted it. The victim holds the upper hand, if you'll pardon the pun.

Next, the statement about the coat and the shirt. What the Good News Bible politely translates as "shirt" is really a reference to a person's undergarment. Jesus' words refer to a legal practice. A coat was frequently used as collateral for a loan by poor people who owned no land. Jesus says that if someone takes your outer garment, which they would as pledge for payment of a debt, give them your underwear as well. What would that leave a person with? Nothing!

Well, imagine you're the debtor. There you stand in the court stark naked and there your creditor stands, red faced, with your outer garment in one hand and your inner garment in the other. There was no hope of winning the trial, the law was stacked in his favour but you have turned the tables, refusing to be humiliated. "You want my coat? Here take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you want next?" Nakedness was taboo in Israel and the shame fell on the one who caused the nakedness. The victim's in control...again.

The third example about walking the extra mile. In those days a Roman soldier walking along the road was permitted to call on any person to carry his pack for him, but only for one mile at a time. Every mile was marked on a Roman road. Imagine the soldier's

surprise when he reaches for his pack and finds the peasant happily continuing. The tables are turned. Normally the soldier must coerce peasants to carry his pack, but here is one who does it cheerfully and won't stop! The soldier is begging to have his pack back, because he could be accused of breaking the one-mile rule!

In other words, every one of these actions recommended by Jesus allows his disciples to go beyond a concern about THEIR RIGHTS and make THE RIGHT response, the one that God would want them to make. Theologian Leonard Sweet talks of the four "rules" by which we live. The Iron rule - Do to others before they do to you; The Silver rule - Do to others as they do to you; The Golden rule - Do to others as you would have them do to you; and, The Titanium rule - Do to others as Jesus has done to you. This is grace working itself out in your life.

As a matter of fact, Jesus puts it rather pointedly: "If you only love the people who love you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners do that! If you were like everyone else in society, concerned only about your own rights, and retaliating as a response, how can God bless you? And what separates you from the rest of society? You might as well not call yourself a Christian. Because you cannot be distinguished from any one else in your neighbourhood, your office, your community.

Disciples focus on making THE RIGHT response. Because when you do that, you are in charge, not the perpetrator; you determine the outcome, not the oppressor. Otherwise you put yourself at his/her mercy; you allow them to dictate your response and in turn, control your actions.

Leonardo Da Vinci, just before he commenced work on his "Last Supper" had a violent argument with a fellow painter. Leonardo was so bitter that he determined to paint the face of his enemy, the other artist, into the face of Judas, and thus take his revenge by handing the man down in infamy and scorn to succeeding generations. The face of Judas was, therefore, one of the first he finished. And everyone could easily recognize it as the face of the painter with whom he had quarrelled. But when he came to paint the face of Christ, he could make no progress. Something seemed to be baffling him, holding him back, frustrating his best efforts.

Finally he came to the conclusion that the thing that was frustrating him was that he had painted the face of his enemy onto the face of Judas. He painted out the face of Judas and was then able to resume his work on the face of Jesus and this time did it with the success that the ages have acclaimed.

When DaVinci moved past his right to take revenge and made the right response instead, he broke the power of hatred and allowed the love of Christ to have the last word. The passage ends with Jesus giving us the ultimate reason why we need to love our enemies.

**"You will be children of the Most High God.  
For he is good to the ungrateful and the wicked.  
Be merciful just as your Father is merciful."**

In Romans 5:8, Paul reminds us that while we were still enemies, Christ died for us and put us right with God. This is grace that when we didn't deserve it - God showed us grace. That while they beat and spat upon Jesus he was prepared to go through with it so that

they might be saved through his sacrifice. As they nailed him to that cruel cross to die he prayed that it might not be held against them...

Has someone done worse to you?

Jesus says that we will be known as God's children by how we reflect God's mercy and goodness in the way we treat one another. Furthermore, we are told that "the measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you." But listen it is not just our enemies that we are required to show grace towards:

Jesus also said:

<sup>21</sup>"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. <sup>23</sup>"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

If you're sitting here today, fuming over what someone said or did,  
if you spend your nights re-playing the wrong someone inflicted upon you,  
if you are always calculating how you can pay back someone for what they did to you,  
if you are having trouble sleeping peacefully because of an unforgiven person,  
if you keep on bringing up past hurts in your conversations....  
This is a day of decision for you.

Will this be the day you allow grace to rule your life?

This is the day you need to ask God for forgiveness for whatever it is that has not enabled you show grace. On this the day you are shown amazing grace through the sacrament of the Lord's supper you need to go to that person or that situation and you need to allow the Grace of Jesus Christ take control of you. If you are not prepared to do this then I urge you to be careful this morning in case you eat and drink damnation to your soul.

The choice is yours. Make it right

(Sermon based upon writings taken from Philip Yancey's book "What's so Amazing about Grace.")