

Eugene Peterson recalls life with his fourth grade nemesis, Garrison Johns.¹ By the time day three in the new school year rolled around, third-grader Eugene knew he was a marked man. Eugene loved school: loved his teacher, his friends, loved learning new things. But the minute the school bell rang, Garrison Johns materialized out of nowhere and the daily beating began. It did not seem to matter that Eugene would take detours and change up his routes to get home. Garrison still found him and Eugene would drag himself home, bruised and humiliated.

Eugene had absorbed his lessons in Sunday school. “Turn the other cheek,” “bless those who persecute you,” “go the extra mile.” “Jesus-sissy,” Garrison taunted him as the pummeling began. “My mother told me that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and that I had better get used to it. And I was also supposed to pray for him. This was getting tiresome.”

March rolled around, and Garrison once again found Eugene, this time with a group of his friends. The taunting and hitting began as if on cue. Peterson writes:

Something snapped. For a moment, the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness, and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise and his, I was stronger than he was. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest, pinned his arms to the ground with my knees, and he was helpless and at my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good, and I hit him again. Blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson in the snow. I said to Garrison, “Say uncle.” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. Then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, “Say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.’” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More

¹ Recounted in John Ortberg’s *Who Is This Man?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 134-135.

blood. I tried again. “Say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior,’” and he said it.

“Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.”

We laugh, and if we are honest, we have to recognize that the history of the church is riddled with many conversions gotten in a similar way. But it is not what Jesus had in mind. In a brutal world where “an eye for an eye” was seen as an *advance* in the pursuit of justice—just take an eye in retribution, do not kill the person; in a time when violence was ready to break out at any moment in Palestine as the Jews were constantly plotting to rid themselves of Rome’s dominion over them--at this time, in such a place, Jesus calls on his disciples to reject retaliatory violence.

“If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek.” You can choose how you respond to oppression or abuse. Rise above insults—reject becoming an agent of violence yourself. Keep control of your sense of dignity and worth. Turn the other cheek. “If someone sues for your shirt, give them your outer cloak also.” Stand naked in the court, if you have to, let the injustice of your accuser to be clear for all to see. “If you are forced to go the first mile, go the second one, as well.” Do more than is required of you. Even in the presence of your enemies, *do not become the evil you are trying to defeat.*” I remember the words of Rev. Nathan Baxter, dean of National Cathedral, in the days of mourning immediately after 9/11: “As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore.”²

² http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism-july-dec01-remember_9-14/

And then Jesus clarifies exactly what he means: “Love your enemies.” Love those who threaten to hurt you. Even your enemies—look upon them with compassion. We are connected by a common humanity. Do not let fear or suspicion destroy your ability to have compassion. *Do not become the evil you are trying to defeat.* Sometimes we are swept up into the fear that we absorb through our families or friends, through the internet or other news sources. Sometimes we see people who are very different from us and we react with fear and suspicion.

Sometimes our ideas about our enemies are inaccurately or incompletely informed, but we go ahead and act on that fear.

Last September, five teenagers spray-painted graffiti on what appeared to them to be a small, run-down, wooden building in Loudon County, VA. It did not look like much and they thought they would have a little fun painting swastikas, dinosaurs, sexual images, and words like “brown power” and “white power” on three sides of the little building. Three of the five youths were minority kids. What they vandalized was a historic African American schoolhouse. When the police questioned them, it became clear that the youths really did not understand the full meaning of what they were drawing. They were acting out of some vague notions, but they were not really motivated by bigotry or hatred toward any class of people.

And so the judge decided they needed to understand that their behavior had entered into the long stream of how various communities had been treated throughout history. She outlined how they would rectify this situation. The teenagers will go to the United States Holocaust Museum. They will attend the “Day

of Remembrance” of the internment of Japanese during WWII, which is held annually at the American History Museum. They will write one book report per month for the next year from a list of books that compiles some of the finest literature on the subjects of race, religion and discrimination: book like Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev*, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Boyle’s *Tortilla Curtain*, to name just a few. They will write a research paper discussing swastikas and white power messages, which must include research on lynchings, the Nazis’ “Final Solution,” the history of the KKK, the Dred Scott, Plessy v. Ferguson, and Brown v. the Board of Education decisions. They will listen to a recording of an elderly black woman who attended that little school from 1938-1945 the young people had defaced.³

Sometimes, we follow the crowd. We mistake who our enemies actually are, and we get a second chance before it is too late.

Do not become the evil you are trying to defeat.

There is a conversation going on in the biblical readings this morning. It is a conversation about the definition of neighbor. It is a pondering of how far love *must* go. In the Leviticus reading, we heard about neighbor love—look out for your neighbor, do not slander or defraud your neighbor, do not exact revenge on your neighbor. Leave the extra after the harvest, the gleanings, for the foreigner and the

³ I first heard this report on NPR and found the story in the local newspaper of Loudoun County, VA.
http://www.loudountimes.com/news/article/five_juveniles_confess_to_vandalizing_historic_african_american543

poor. But the concern of the text is to define the community and to draw a big circle around it for the exercise of neighbor love. Some people are in the in-group and they judge and reject all those they decide do not keep God's law and are not a part of God's people.⁴

Jesus blows this idea up. "Your neighbor" becomes a universal concept. Love your enemies. Pray for them. Imitate the nature of God, who sends rain, who gives good gifts to good and bad alike. It just doesn't sit well. At dinner recently, friends visiting Nashville and I had talked a bit about the national scene and they began to tell me about some real ugliness happening in their home presbytery. "It's so political," they said. "I think we should keep politics out of the church and just be the church."

I know you have been privileged to have good preachers and so you know that preachers walk around each week with their minds filled with the upcoming sermon. We are contemplating what the scripture says, the historical detail of its setting, what several scholars, theologians, and other writers have thought—which then becomes a filter through which we consciously and even unconsciously interrogate contemporary life. "It's so political. Keep politics out. Just be the church," my friends said.

And I, brimming with Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount and dripping with the impossible demands of Jesus for us to love our enemies, said: "That is not who Jesus was. We have to face that he asked us to follow him in every part of our lives." My friend said: "Well, he was God. And we are not. We can't do that. I think

⁴ *NIB*, Matthew 5:38-48.

we should do what we can do, which is to try to keep the church going and keep politics out.”

He’s right—don’t you think? It’s impossible—even in the church, it’s impossible, to say nothing of our suspicious and violent world. Love your enemies? Pray for your enemies? Look on them with the same compassion as your Father in heaven does—God sends rain and good things to everyone. Love your enemies?

What Jesus asks “is not reasonable. It violates common sense.”⁵ And while it may interrupt the violent cycle of retribution, we have only to look at Christ on the cross to see how such an ethic can end. But Jesus’ demands upon his followers are real and he lived them, and they point to another reality, the reality of the God who has redefined what power and sovereignty look like. It looks like the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. It says that Love—naïve as that may sound to the most pragmatic of us—is the only thing, finally, that ever changes how the world is. G. K. Chesterton said: “Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”

And sometimes, just sometimes, we get glimpses in this life of a cycle of violence rejected, of love that really does triumph over hate.

In the small Gulf Coast city of Victoria, TX, there are several churches, but just one synagogue, and one mosque—at least until the mosque mysteriously burned down just a couple of weeks ago on February 8. Arson, the authorities now know, was the cause of the fire. The members of the mosque were distraught. But in a small city, everyone knows everyone, and the synagogue and the mosque and the

⁵ Ibid.

churches have done interfaith work together and have hosted each other's members. And so, the Jews of Victoria walked into the home of Muslim Shahid Hashmi, a surgeon and one of the founders of the mosque, and put the keys of their synagogue into his hands. And the town of Victoria undertook a local and national campaign and others have taken up the cause. Already they have raised \$1.1 million dollars. "This is sad for everyone in the community, and as Jews we especially have to feel for the Muslim community. "When a calamity like this happens, we have to stand together, the president of the synagogue said."⁶

In days in which "2-state/1-state, I don't know, whatever state solution" fills our national ears, I recall what William Sloane Coffin had to say about faith, the irrational and other-reality faith we claim in Jesus of Nazareth.

"I love the recklessness of faith," Coffin said. "First you leap, and then you grow wings."

In the name of Christ, who lived and died transparent to the Love that is God. And he calls us to resurrection faith—especially as we confront not only the enemy without, but the enemy within as well. Amen.

⁶ <http://forward.com/news/361793/jews-hand-muslims-synagogue-keys-when-a-texas-mosque-burns-down/?attribution=home-hero-item-text-2>