

Killing it with kindness: Matthew 5:38-48  
Preached at Smoke Rise Baptist  
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I thank God that the person I was in middle school is not the person I am today. I am going to begin with an embarrassing story. It is the story of my first and my only fist fight. You may not be able to tell it now, because of my imposing stature and steely glare and my cut jaw, but at one point in my life, I was kind of wimpy. Oh, yes. It's true. Can you imagine it? I had curly red hair, an early teen physique and I was a swimmer. That may be cool now but I have one word for you...speedo.

His name was Matt. He was almost a foot taller, half a foot wider, trained in karate and he had it out for me. Every day of the first 6 weeks of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, he picked on me about something. If it wasn't my shoes, it was my shirt. If it wasn't the music I listened to it was the TV shows I liked. And one day, as we were walking to first period down the central hall at Shiloh Middle School, he started stepping on the back of my shoes.

That...was...it! I had had it up to here with his shabby treatment. It was not planned but I remember feeling a flash of anger, a surge of adrenaline and some courageous music in my ears. I turned around and socked him in the stomach as hard as I could!

The blow didn't have the effect I was hoping for. He took a step back. And I'm sure he was surprised. But the next thing I remember was feeling the almost simultaneous blow to my eye socket and the blow to my back, as I hit the hallway floor. It happened so fast! Luckily a group of teachers were standing right beside us and stopped Matt from wailing on me.

Have you ever heard the expression, killing it with kindness? In middle school, it never occurred to me that I had any other options available in response to Matt's criticism. I would take it all in and let it build up until my body could no longer hold it in. It never occurred to me

that I could take positive action against Matt's oppressive force against me. It never occurred to me that the answer came from Jesus in his sermon on the mount. You don't think about these things in the heat of moments.

In our scripture today, we read about how to resist those who mistreat you. Whether it is dealing with a blow to the cheek, the requisitioning of a garment or the order to carry a heavy and burdensome load, Jesus says we are not to reciprocate in kind. It is tough, to say the least, to say to someone: "You've hurt me. I have been wronged. But I will give you more than you have asked for. You ask me to carry your burden for a mile? Let's make it two. I will give you all that you ask for and more."

I used to wonder when reading these verses: Is God requiring me to never stand up for myself or take pride in my self-respect? How can God ask me to lower myself that way? Why in life should I dignify the requests which require me to accept this kind of personal injustice? The answer seems to be in God's perspective of how we are to deal with the vicious cycle of violence which plagues most of humankind.

Matthew 5:41 states: "and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." There are a couple of interesting details in this verse that I would like to highlight. You may recognize a popular phrase derived from this verse: "Go the extra mile." If you are a sports fan, you recognize this as typical, press conference, coach speak. In fact, while waking up to Sportscenter yesterday morning, I heard that phrase placed in between: "Were going to give it 110%" and "We'll be taking this one game at a time." It's true, some of Jesus most recognized sayings have been adopted and used frequently in our culture. But let's not water them down. Consider "go the extra mile" from the perspective of an oppressed Jewish man or woman from

Judea, 2000 years ago. It would be quite offensive to hear a fellow Jew and teacher of the Law (ie Jesus) tell you to go beyond your forced obligation and take it to the next level.

We know that in the time of Jesus, Rome was in authority over the land. And those in the military had the right to press civilians into service for whatever purpose they saw fit. As you can imagine, this was a sore spot for some, especially the Jews in Galilee, whom we can assume probably got picked out for service on a regular basis. And it may not have been just Roman soldiers who were implementing this right but the local soldiers of King Herrod as well.

Imagine the resentment you would feel in this environment. Imagine further how radical the statement of Jesus is! “You should not just go your one required mile but an extra mile on top of that, one which is not required of you. Do more than is asked. Subjugate yourself to an overpowering authority.”

How would that feel to you? I would be pretty upset, as the leader to whom I owe so much respect, the one who is supposed to be leading me away from service to my oppressors, is telling me to do just that. I would want to cry out: “Is this not supposed to be our King and deliverer, a great warrior sent by God to conquer those who constantly oppress us?” I know that I have felt this way toward Jesus today, from time to time, when I feel overwhelmed with the world and wish that God would reach down and wipe away the things that I see as oppressive and evil. Or better yet: God could ordain my actions as a righteous warrior. What did Jesus know that they did not know? What does Jesus know that we do not know?

Jesus intimately knows the heart of God. Therefore, God’s wishes are Jesus wishes. When Jesus proclaimed the ethic of “going the extra mile,” he was trying to get across the ethic that God requires any cycle of violence to be broken. The Romans were unjust and violent to the Jews. Jesus said: Turn the other cheek. An enemy today requires a burden from you, one that

you cannot get away from. Jesus says: Go the extra mile. And then Jesus says further: Love your enemies. The followers of Christ can be the wedge that is driven between the connective circular tissues of the cycle. And by not reciprocating and following the teaching, will break these tissues. But this ethic is staunchly against our nature, isn't it? It can feel a little unnatural. You might be saying: "Easy for you to say preacher, but I need to stand up for myself."

It is prudent for us to recognize that from a first century perspective, Rome was an overpowering force. Jesus recognized that conventional resistance to this force would bring nothing but destruction upon his people. "Go the extra mile" was a way for the battle to be waged by alternative means: by doubling the service and showing overwhelming generosity. For Jesus this would represent one way to place the wedge firmly in the potential cycle of violence. Essentially he was advocating "killing it with kindness."

It is prudent to recognize that from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, "go the extra mile" represents what our human response to God's abundant mercy should be. God is merciful to us, even when we may not deserve it. Therefore, we should want to "go the extra mile." We should want to show abundant love to others. We should always desire to do more than is asked.

Because what is the alternative? The alternative is a negative and futile response that just feeds into the evil of an oppressive system of violence. The alternative is a response that leads to resentment, bitterness and hatred. Jesus asks us to double our service, kill evil with kindness and break any cycle.

Admittedly, this is a hard ethic to follow. Like faith, we are commanded to do this, mostly without seeing the results of our actions. We are asked to act with Godly kindness and then see what God does with it. The authority to change the hearts of humankind is God's alone.

But if we know this ethic of God, we also know God's continual work...work that began at the cross...for reconciliation through love and relationships.

Therefore we must be careful with how we deal with the hearts of women and men. Because nonviolence lies in the relationships we make and the relationships we are called by God to protect. One must understand, that while an evil person will foster an evil relationship, our only recourse is to respond to that relationship God's way. Furthermore, as ministers of the Gospel, our relationships with others are our most cherished possessions. Responding God's way puts God at the heart of all relationships and allows God to do His work. If we are always flying off the handle, giving an "appropriate" worldly response, the damage to the present and future of any relationship is done.

An example of this relationship building happened to me just the other day. I was heading for the door of the Starbucks on Indian Trail. I held the door for a woman...the same woman who had cut me off to pull in the parking lot...she blew by me, obviously agitated and hurried. She was on her phone with a headset, emphatically and loudly for all to hear, dressing down someone who I can assume is an employee who had made a mistake. She was inconsolable about whatever the problem was and as she approached the counter to order her coffee and pastry, she hung up the phone in frustration and barked out her order.

She then began to search for money in her purse and to her horror; she discovered that she had forgotten her wallet. She froze and looked at the clerk to see if he was going to throw her a lifeline. I froze because I just wanted to see what would happen. She began to stammer with embarrassment as she and the clerk just looked at each other, neither wanting to make a move. Then, in a deep voice, a man in line behind me said: "Don't worry about it, put it on my bill." Her demeanor changed in a heartbeat. She thanked him profusely. And as she grabbed

her reconciliation cup of coffee and pastry, she moved to one of the tables near the door. I observed as she called the employee back and begin to back away from all of her harsh criticism from just a few minutes before. “Put it on my bill,” or as Jesus would have said it, “Go the extra mile,” had changed the moment. Because of the benevolence of someone toward someone else, the cycle was broken. It was killed with kindness. Who knows what would have transpired at her office between the woman and her employee, or that employee and his or her spouse...or children.

Evil can be an overwhelming force. Our emotions betray us frequently. Jesus recognized a powder keg when he saw one and instructed his followers not to respond with their natural emotions. He knew generosity won over oppression. He knows kindness triumphs over violence. It is not easy to let our hearts rule when our heads are screaming for vengeance. But as history has shown, the harshness of raw emotions that lead to violence can be soothed by courageous human beings who are willing to risk the extra mile. Evil, violence and hatred will be killed with kindness. The cycle can be broken.