

WINGS OF THE DOVE
WHY WE MUST FIGHT

Texts on Sunday, June 17, 2012

Matthew 5: 38-48; Romans 13: 1-10

CONFLICT IS AWFUL. Conflict is normal. Conflict is not going away. Until heaven and earth pass away, conflict is how we go and conflict is how we grow. Such is the worldview of Jesus and the apostles of the early church. Not victory on earth, not perfect peace, not *thy will done*, but a fight. The *Revelation to John* certainly imagines a total victory for the armies of Jesus, but it is bought with such wrath and violence that we should make no apology for keeping that wild dream at the back of the book. The heart of our scriptures beats very differently. Here, human powers are real and divided. Here you will be struck on the right cheek. Here they will take your coat. Here, they will force you to bear their burdens. There will be enemies. And you are commanded to love them. Religion conceived as lovely feelings governing our common life seems sentimental set alongside Jesus. Why, he was executed, for God's sake. In this world, conflict is the way. Here, we must fight.

Today, we open a series of sermons which aims to connect our faith in Christ with the fights of our times. Beginning in July and continuing well into the fall, we will consider many of the most vexed conflicts of our civilization, those around which no moral or political will exists for decision and solution of vast injustices. I do not aim to define "what Christians must believe" about the crises we face, but I do want to claim that your commitment to Christ must issue in a decisive way of seeing our situation; a way of seeing which requires your decision on the great matters of the day: how you will stand, what you will say, how you will act, how change, how start to change and when, what help to seek—in a word, how to struggle, how to fight.

Decision is a word-cousin with all the other *-cisions*: incision, precision, concision. They all have to do with cutting. Decision means cutting off the debate, no more going back and forth, unwilling to commit; time to decide who you are and whose you are and what you are going to do. I hope these sermons may help us to stand in the urgency of James Russell Lowell's poem, feeling that "once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide / In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side."

First we must get complex. Let us ask, Why must we fight? *Can't we all just get along?* as the badly beaten Rodney King plaintively put it twenty years ago. No, we cannot. That is the first word we need in coming to an adequate theory of what makes us tick. The Marxists are wrong in their

reading of human nature, for no peace is coming after the power and money interests are laid low by violence. The free-market capitalists are wrong in their reading of human nature. How bizarre they are, claiming innocence and pure motives, refusing regulations of their war-making and their money-making because, they assure us, they can be trusted to govern themselves. Hah! Self-government is exactly the thing they abandoned when they set out to win the world's prizes. Religious idealists misread human nature, too, if they suppose that peace will burst forth from mere peacefulness. These false theories of human relations are motivated by desires that seem to be hidden from those who hold them.

Just before Hitler came to power eighty years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr published the book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Here on page two he jumps on the question, why we must fight.

While it is possible for intelligence to increase the range of benevolent impulse, and thus prompt human beings to consider the needs and rights of others than those to whom they are bound by organic and physical relationship, there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals, which make it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves. All social cooperation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. (p.2)

Niebuhr's argument is sober about sin, though he does not much use that term. He speaks rather of "definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals" to care about others. Thus, while the moral ideals advanced by religions can and do motivate and inspire individuals in their close relations, larger societies cannot function morally, he argues, but only in terms of group interests, which is to say, politics. An individual may indeed grow toward the ideal of self-sacrifice, but no group can aim for group-sacrifice as its goal. Rather, justice must be the societal ideal—and justice requires the power of coercion. And the power to coerce always overreaches. Niebuhr, again:

All through history, one may observe the tendency of power to destroy its very *raison d'être*. [Power] is suffered because it achieves internal unity and creates external defenses for the nation. But it grows to such proportions that it destroys the social peace of the state by the animosities which it arouse[s], and it enervates the sentiment of patriotism by robbing the common man of the basic privileges which might bind him to his nation. (p.11)

Therefore, we fight. We must fight for what is right. The principle is already plain in the scriptures. The question is, How to fight?

I am calling this sermon series "Wings of the Dove" to ground my thought in a strange requirement of love, needful even in the realm of law, if we can heed Paul's final word in Romans 13. The strange requirement is to affirm this: We need the other wing. So ordinary to our speech are the terms "right wing" and "left wing," and so beloved of Americans is the image of the eagle, if not the dove, it seems odd that we never notice that our core metaphor

wants two wings, not one. The other day, I heard Rick Santorum at the CPAC Chicago conference gloating over the one big difference between conservatives and their opponents: “We are right and they are wrong,” he said to ecstatic cheers. Silly man. Only one affirmation is complex enough for disciples of the Master. We are one body, with wings. If you want to fly, don’t cut, don’t clip that other wing. Have you not seen a great bird made prisoner by its master, who had but to scissor off a little of one wing to keep the creature’s beauty for himself by destroying its flight? If you want to fly, O people, do your thing; pray for your enemies and swing your wing, hard. That is how we must fight.



Early in May, the great biblical professor Walter Wink died. His life was celebrated in a memorial service yesterday in James Chapel at Union Seminary. Although I was not present there, I meditated on his teaching through the day. I first studied with Walter and June Keener Wink at the Stony Point Center in the 1980s. Having abandoned as bankrupt the thoroughly intellectual methods of “higher criticism” of the Bible, he was now “Transforming Bible Study,” as the title of one of his books put it. His commitment was to engage with the texts in so basic a way that one might confront the person of Jesus and be brought to a decision like his.

After June Keener had taken us through a movement exercise to bring awareness into our bodies, Walter read, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn”—but interrupted this too well known passage mid-sentence to invite one of us to stand now and move as if to strike him on the cheek. Inevitably, our right fist would come toward his *left* cheek. And Walter would protest, “No! Jesus says ‘the right cheek,’ Try to hit me on the right cheek.” The reluctant offender would try this and fail, and ultimately would resort to using the back of the hand, a slap. Then Walter would pounce. The back-handed slap is the assault of a superior who intends to humiliate more than hurt you, he would explain. And Jesus is saying, *When they try to humiliate you, do not be humiliated. Instead, show them some cheek; show them your left cheek full on. Invite them to treat you—to fight you—as an equal.*

We must fight. This is how we fight, Wink taught; never giving in to rule or to be ruled by fear and force, which he called “the domination system.” Go read the rest of Wink on walking the extra mile and giving up your underwear with your coat, and you will feel the guidance of militant non-violence in transformed Bible study. There is wisdom for why we must fight.

Now, Walter Wink was as sober-minded as Niebuhr about sin and conflict. “The struggle against evil can make us evil,” he cautioned, “and no

amount of good intentions automatically prevents this from happening.” But just here, where Niebuhr’s counsel becomes thoroughly political, and his admiration for the religious impulse almost wistful, Wink’s word doubles down for the fight. “The whole armor of God that Ephesians 6 counsels us to put on is crafted specifically to protect us against the contagion of evil within our own souls, and its metals are all forged in prayer,” he wrote.

Perhaps all that has been revealed to history in the eighty years since Niebuhr published—the holocaust, the Second World War, Gandhi’s truth, King’s dream, the evils of many American wars, mass incarceration, the Obama hope and more—is renewing for some of us the sense for what Niebuhr could only call “a sublime madness in the soul” which yet holds the “very valuable illusion of the perfect realization of justice.”

This I believe. As surely as history has shown again and again that power so deranges the desires of the powerful that they finally destroy the very systems which feed their appetites, just so surely is America in for hard times. *Power concedes nothing without a demand*, as Frederick Douglass said. Therefore, when we fight for what is right in the hope that so great a disaster will not befall all, we are fighting for all—for the whole bird, even though power and privilege will never understand. Therefore, you who are training in self-government, which is both spiritual practice and political practice; you who understand that your own appetites are strong and in want of true government; you who desire mastery from your Master and who are able to see the whole body, the dove and eagle on the wing, and know to pray for the whole even as you swing your wing forward in action, you are the ones who will give a new birth to this troubled nation. You are the ones with courage for the times. You are the ones who know why we must fight, and how.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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