



Creative resistance and hopeful evangelizing

Matthew 5.³⁸⁻⁴²

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. ⁴¹And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. ⁴²Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

Introduction

I am not the first, and will likely not be the last to observe that the latest “Ism” named after a certain former president, along with all its metastatic permutations—such as the fantastical Q-Anon insanity, the anti-science anti-vaxxer vocation, or the anti-social anti-masker madness—possesses all the characteristics of a cult. As with all cultic movements, this cult’s delusions wrap themselves around the cultist’s very sense of self so that denying the delusion becomes tantamount to losing one’s very identity and soul; a denial of self, really. In addition, denial of cult practices and beliefs becomes an act of damnable apostacy against the false god. Thus, as is the case with all cults, members of this latest religio-politico cult are immune to reason. The more non-adherents try to reason with them, the deeper the cult’s adherents dive into, and the tighter they hold onto their self-destructive delusions.

In addition, this new-fangled cult, along with its permutations, seems to pride itself in rudeness, offensiveness, confrontation, aggression, extremism, etc. Some who have observed this aspect of this latest “Ism” have gone so far as to suggest that the exhibition of nastiness is actually the point of the movement. I do not deny that this observation has a certain appeal.

But, in the end, it must, I believe, be rejected. Rather, the rudeness and aggression stem from the very nature of cult. No quarter can be given. Everything is a matter of life and death. Everything is a matter of self-justification and, more, self-*preservation*. Everything that is said and done is in preservation of the false god—for surely the real God needs no human protection. With so much at stake, extremism is no vice, to paraphrase the late Barry Goldwater.

Those who would seek to reclaim a cultist from their mad delusions, then, must surrender all thought of appealing to reason and logic. Even the power of the word of God, which has so often been so effective in reclaiming the lost, seems blunted in the present age. It is almost as if a heretofore divided demonic force has managed to collect and unite itself so as to now act in concert to pull the same rope in the same direction. It seems that millions have decided that possession by another is better than self-possession.

None of this means, though, that we cannot or should not “speak out” about what we are witnessing. The world is in as great a need of exorcism as ever. Truth must be spoken. This is not “judgement.” It is, rather, descriptive, speaking what really was, what really is, and, most difficult of all, what really will be. But, we who would attempt to reclaim the souls of those lost to the blasphemy of this latest demonic cult—and we must try lest we lose our country and they lose their souls—will need to be far, far more creative than we have heretofore been. In trying to reason with them—and when that failed to humiliate them—we have only driven them deeper into the cesspool that, exclusive before the 45th president’s rise to power, has now been opened to the general public.

Jesus. I believe, possesses just such creativity and can inspire our minds with creative suggestions for dealing with the cancer that has invaded America’s body politic. During his earthly ministry, Jesus offered his disciples suggestions for and approaches to dealing with individuals who were swept up in cult-like delusions that had come to look normal and inevitable to so many. In addition, Jesus’ creative suggestions and his hope that we would develop further creative responses to delusion and antagonism has the added benefit of keeping us from being swept up in the antagonist’s antagonism.

In this homily, we will look at three examples of creative resistance and evangelization in the face of antagonism. All three are found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Hopefully, we can take something from them that will enlarge our labor of reclamation in the lives of those taken in by and lost in the latest delusions that have, as I have so often said, all the characteristics of possession and of an anti-Christ revolt against the Son of God. We must be much, much more creative if we are to succeed in our ministry of resistance and redemption among those caught up in the mad delusions of our day.

Protagonist and antagonist

In the course of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents three scenarios in each of which he introduces a protagonist and an antagonist. In each case, I believe, the antagonist possesses attitudes that very much mimic those of a cultist. First, each antagonist feels utterly certain that they are justified in their attitude toward and their treatment of the protagonist. Their actions look and feel, to them, natural and inevitable. Second, each antagonist is utterly dismissive of the protagonist's individualism and of any shared humanity with them. Finally, we suggest, no amount of discussion, reasoning, or pleading can or will shake the antagonists from their own sense of the correctness of their ideas and actions or their belief in the incorrectness and worthlessness of the protagonist.

In these three scenarios, we meet, from first to last, an antagonist who is cruel, an antagonist who is litigious, and an antagonist who is entitled. In each scenario there is a protagonist who is the object of their antagonism. In each instance, Jesus places a disciple in the role of protagonist. Jesus likely places his disciples in the role of protagonist as a consequence of his insight that in a world such as it is his disciples would often find themselves targets of antagonism. However, I also believe that it was his understanding and expectation that his disciples would never take up the unwholesome role of antagonist.

We will examine each of these scenarios and the relationship between protagonist and

antagonist. We will then attempt to draw meaning applications in our life today, especially as it relates to our fixed determination to resist and, if possible, redeem those possessed by cultic delusion.

1st scenario

The first scenario might require a bit more explanation than the other two. So, we thank you for your patience.

“Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

This suggestion concerning how to deal with someone who feels and acts antagonistic toward us has elicited no end of confusion, discussion, debate, and disagreement. “Am I just supposed to be a doormat?” one elderly gentleman once complained indignantly. “I am not just going to let someone break into my house, rape my wife and kill my children,” asserted another.

This is all, of course, silliness. Is the inability to understand willful? Purposeful? I don’t know. But, in an attempt to help my students better visualize and understand the truth and genius of Jesus’ creative approach to others’ antagonism, I often had my students act out the scenario. It went something like this. I invited two students to come to the front of the class. I then asked one of them to hit the other on the right cheek. As often as not, after the performers and their classmates had had a good chuckle at this, the individual playing the role of antagonist would ball up their dominant right hand into a fist and pretend to punch the other in the face.

“O.K.” I would say, “anyone see a problem here?” Sometimes it was an observant student, sometimes it was I who made the observation. “She balled up her right hand into a fist and struck him in the cheek. But, which cheek did she strike?”

After a moment's thought, they would answer, "Uh, the left."

"But we asked her to strike the *right* cheek. So, let's try it again, please. Strike him on his *right* cheek.

After a moment of uncertainty, thought, and calculation, the individual would often ball up their left hand into a fist and pretend to punch the other in the face so that the punch landed on the right cheek.

"You didn't seem quite as sure about hitting him when you used your left hand. Would a punch from your left hand carry as much force as one from your right hand?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I am right-handed."

"And did you know that right-handedness, which is today most dominant, has always been most dominant?"

"Yes, that makes sense. Why would it have changed?"

"Indeed. And did you know that even as late as 1964 when I was in the fourth grade, many left-handed people were being "forced" to become right hand dominate?"

"No."

"Well, they were. My fourth-grade teacher, for example, demanded that the two or three students who wrote left-handed learn to write with their right. I had a friend whose father forced him to throw a baseball right-handed even though it felt more natural to him to use his

left.”

“Why... would they do that?”

“We don’t have time right now to go into all the ends and outs—and, anyway, some of it would be gross, more suitably called “potty mouth” talk—but for much of human history the left hand has been considered the “dirty” and “evil” hand. For this reason, its use was something restricted.

“Oh,” observed a few astute students over the years, “Jesus said that the goats, or the wicked would be on his left hand.”

“Yes, this left-hand/right-hand thing has many interesting twist and turns in scripture. But, let’s get back to our current dilemma. You must strike the *right* cheek. But when you try to punch with your right fist your blow lands on the *left* cheek. At the same time, you are not allowed to or do not think to use your left hand. So, what do you do?”

After a moment’s thought, the individual would raise their right hand and, turning it just so, pretend to deliver a back handed slap.

“Excellent,” I would say. After thanking the individual for their help, they would return to their seat, and we would discuss what we had learned.

So, what have we learned?

First, we have learned that the strike to the cheek that Jesus envisions, whether delivered with the forbidden and weak left-hand fist or with the back of the right hand, is not one that is intended to do maximum physical harm. It is certainly not to be likened to rape or murder. So what is the meaning and purpose behind a back-handed slap?

Though it is not intended to do *physical* harm, it is intended to do harm: emotional or psychic

harm. It is intended to put another in their place. It is intended to humiliate. It is intended to assert dominance on the part of the one doing the striking.

And what does the protagonist hope to achieve in turning the other cheek—for make no mistake, turning the other cheek is an act of hope. First, of course, the protagonist declares that they will not become an antagonist. They will not participate in any system or engage in any actions intended to humiliate and dehumanize another. They will not participate in the jockeying for power and dominance that is one of this world's most beloved hobbies.

But secondly, and just as importantly, turning the other cheek bears witness to the hope that there is still good in the antagonist. It seeks to reveal to the antagonist the nature of their own actions and call them, without recrimination, to repentance. It is an act of compassionate ministry. Hopefully, the antagonist will not strike again. Perhaps the protagonist submission to humiliation and then more humiliation will give the antagonist pause, cause him to reexamine himself and his actions. Perhaps it will change and redeem.

We have, of course, an extreme example of this from the Book of Mormon. Here a blow is intended to do physical harm. Here, in fact, it is intended to kill. Irritated and threatened by the Ammonites resort to pacifism, the Lamanites instituted a pogrom of murder and annihilation. As more and more Ammonites died without putting up resistance, the Lamanite antagonists were forced to face the reality of their actions. The revelation softened many.

“Now when the Lamanites saw that their brethren would not flee from the sword, neither would they turn aside to the right hand or to the left, but that they would lie down and perish, and praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword—now when the Lamanites saw this they did forbear from slaying them; and there were many whose hearts had swollen in them for those of their brethren who had fallen under the sword, for they repented of the things which they had done. And* they threw down their weapons of war, and they would not take them again, for they were stung for the murders which they had committed; and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them. And* the people of God were joined that day

by more than the number who had been slain...”¹

This hope of changing and redeeming the antagonist, it seems to me, is central to Jesus’ suggested creative response to the antagonism of the smitter.

If, however, the antagonist does strike again and does not enter into any sort of self-reflection, the humiliation the protagonist suffers—a trifle compared to the security they have in Jesus—will be a small price to pay for the chance of redeeming a soul that is precious in the sight of God.

In this scenario, it is unlikely that giving tit for tat would have produced any sort of peaceful resolution between the two parties. It would likely have made things worse. It is also unlikely that anything the protagonist could have said would have softened or altered the antagonist feelings and actions toward them. Change in the attitudes and behaviors of the antagonist was beyond vengeance or reasoning. It required a creative, if risky, strategy. Jesus seems to think that something good might come from it. Jesus also seems to think that his disciples have the spiritual wherewithal to endure the potential consequences of such creative ministry’s failure.

2nd scenario

The second scenario requires a little less exposition.

“If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.”

Our antagonist is suing our protagonist. Questions about the legitimacy of the suit, or of guilt and innocence are ignored (though we might be justified in assuming, as Jesus probably anticipated, that the protagonist is not guilty). In Matthew’s version (the reverse of Luke’s), the plaintiff demands the defendant’s innermost garment (Greek, *chiton*) as compensation for some loss—real or imagined. Jesus wants the defendant to hand over not only the demanded

¹ Alma 24.²³⁻²⁶

“underwear” but their more expensive outerwear (Greek, *himation*) or “robe” as well. If the defendant follows Jesus’ counsel, we can well imagine the scene. The defendant will stand buck naked in the middle of the courtroom!

Now, this seems rather strange, but we can come to some understanding of it through a modern analogy. This scenario might be akin to one in which a defendant, sued for \$500 dollars, not only pays the \$500 dollars without argument, but insists on voluntarily paying an addition \$500 for a total of \$1000 dollars.

Now the shock, the incomprehension that the defendant’s actions are likely to cause are obvious. Everyone is looking at everyone else saying, “What the heck just happened?” The plaintiff may be uncomfortable—or not—taking the additional \$500 dollars. He may—or not—sense the injustice of taking \$1000 when the damage—real of imagined—was valued at only \$500. The point is, in addition to refusing to enter into a pissing contest with the plaintiff, the defendant has hope. He hopes that his actions will cause everyone, the plaintiff in particular, to pause, to consider, to question, “What the heck are we doing here?” There is hope that the plaintiff will be able to see the error of his ways. There is hope that the plaintiff is still redeemable. There is hope that he can be redeemed and improved.

Of course, in Jesus’ scenario, the shock and incomprehension and discomfort are magnified by the physical nakedness of the defendant. Everyone, including, likely, the plaintiff, is uncomfortable and embarrassed about being party to what has happened and in looking upon the humiliating nakedness of the defendant. It is clear to everyone that something has gone horribly wrong. This should not have happened. No one deserves to be standing buck naked in the middle of a courtroom for all eyes to see.

And if, perchance, the plaintiff refuses, again, to consider and repent? Well, again, it is worth the cost. What’s a little public nudity in exchange for a soul?

3rd scenario

Here is the third scenario.

“Whosoever shall compel² thee to go a mile, go with him twain.”

It seems that during the Roman occupation of Judah, Roman civil authorities could force the Jewish population into a variety of civic actions related to the transport of people, materials, intelligence, etc. For example, a Roman soldier could force a non-citizen to carry his gear for a limited distance. So, we can imagine a disciple being forced against his will to carry a soldier’s heavy military gear for a mile. At the end of the mile, the soldier, ever faithful to the “rule of law,” informs the disciple that he can now drop the gear and be on his way.

But, imagine the soldier’s surprise when the disciple volunteers, happily, to carry the gear another mile! Why, the protagonist wasn’t made to do anything against his will after all! He had carried the equipment willingly and was ready to do so longer and further. What thoughts must the soldier have? All sorts of possibilities arise—possibilities that would have been unimaginable and impossible had the disciple put up the normal resistance and bitterly yielded to the unjust demand.

Might it be that the soldier, assuming that the disciple had carried the gear only because he was forced to do so, begin to wonder if the disciple did so, not because he was forced, but because he actually wanted to? Was the disciple pleased to be of assistance? Would the soldiers object to using the disciple further? Did it seem unjust, unkind to allow the disciple to carry the gear another mile? Might the soldier think twice before forcing another innocent bystander into involuntary service.

Had the disciple responded to the antagonist with his own antagonism, only one potential would have existed: more antagonism. But because the protagonist followed Jesus’ suggestion, a whole host of possibilities arise that would otherwise have been impossible

² Greek, *angareuō*, “to force, compel, or press into service in military or civil matters.”

Once more, we see a disciple avoiding an expected and justifiable confrontation over what amounts to a slight wrong perpetrated against him. We see a disciple who refuses to partake of the antagonism of the antagonist. In addition, we see the possibility of change on the part of the antagonist for which the protagonist hopes. Denied the opportunity to exert his superiority by aggressively, perhaps violently, countering the expected resistance, the antagonist is given the opportunity to reexamine his actions and ask questions that he would not otherwise have asked.

As for the protagonist, he has once more endured by a small inconvenience. For one who knows the worth of the soul in the eyes of God, it is a small price to pay for the possibility of seeing the antagonist changed and redeemed.

Conclusion and benediction

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus offered his disciples unique and creative ways to deal with and disarm conflicts that might arise as a result of specific types of unjust aggression—as if there is a “just” form of aggression. But there can be little doubt that Jesus expected his disciples to take those specific examples, draw principles out of them, and then apply the principles to new forms of aggression. Here, I have attempted to apply Jesus’ time-bound examples of antagonism and his suggested response to them with our response today to the delusional and antagonistic cult-like movements spawned by the 45th president of the United States.

As will be apparent to those who have followed my responses to recent developments on America’s right, including, shamefully, among American “Christians,” I have often not followed Jesus’ advice. I have sometimes met the movement’s unreason and aggression with my own version of unreason and aggression. I have engaged in antagonism. I have poked my finger in the eye. I have not exercised the sort of creative response that Jesus proposed. I do not apologize for speaking truth—or what I perceive as truth. We must stand against the evil that is “Trumpism” with all its permutations. But we can try to do it in the most Christ-like

manner possible.

I am trying, but have a long way to go.

Recently, I allowed myself to engage in a debate with an anti-masker, anti-vaxxer whom I once thought of as a friend, but with whom I now have little to do—or he with me. I could sense the tensions and tempters rising. Before I said something for which I would be sorry, I held up my hand. “We need to stop here. We are getting nowhere. Obviously, neither of us is going to budge. But, I would like to ask one last question. Though I would be curious to hear your answer, I do not want to hear it. You can just answer to yourself.

“I want you to imagine that you received a call from President Nelson’s office asking that you come for an audience with him. You are reminded that he is a 97-year-old man and so are informed that in order to protect him you will be required to wear a mask. You are informed that you will need to be vaccinated or submit to a test immediately before entering his office. What would you do?”

Though he started to answer, I stopped him. “I don’t want to hear it. You don’t answer to me.” I walked away. I do not know what thoughts he had then, over the following minutes, when he prayed that night, or when he laid his head on his pillow. I don’t know what he is thinking now or if it has had any impact on his thoughts and actions.

I admit to being curious, though I am almost 100% certain that he and his wife would be there with masks and submit to a test—more likely be vaccinated. If I am honest, it makes me wonder why he values President Nelson’s life over mine. It makes me wonder, honestly, just what kind of gospel his is.

Anyway, this is a very, very weak example of me, trying to be creative and trying to avoid antagonism. I hope to become more creative. I want to believe everyone can be improved

through Christ-like behavior. Perhaps you can join me.³

*“The law of the LORD is perfect,
converting the soul:
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple.
The statutes of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart:
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring for ever:
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
yea, than much fine gold:
sweeter also than honey
and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is thy servant warned:
and in keeping of them there is great reward.”⁴*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

³ Actually, Jesus’ creative suggestions and my thoughts on them can be applied to those who sit on the opposite side of the political divide from me. If they call themselves disciples of Christ, they too are under the obligation of avoiding antagonistic thoughts and behaviors and seeking peace with and redemption for those poor lost souls such as myself.

⁴ Psalm 19.⁷⁻¹¹