

Opposition
Matthew 5:21-22

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Last week I talked with you about the vast polarization that we are experiencing now in our country. We explored the way to stand by conviction without demonizing the other. We committed to being a church that leads in the community by example. We even practiced ways to do so:

I love you.

Wow, we really see that differently.

Let me tell you why.

I love you.

Today we continue the teaching from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, especially as regards the opposition one might receive for standing by principle.

The parsha (portion of scripture) we have today is Jesus' teaching on non-retaliation.

Jesus expands on the teaching from the Torah that limits retaliation to only equal measure – eye for an eye – but no more (if you steal my cow I shouldn't kill your whole family and burn down your village, one of the principles of Just War Theory, proportionality). He says that you should not even resist evil. Why? Because you add to the evil. And you give evil more to push against.

If those protesters in Berkeley took this to heart they would practice active non-violent resistance instead of a resistance of violence and destruction, which their detractors simply use against them.

Jesus says that if someone strikes you on the cheek offer the other. He says that if someone sues you for your coat give your cloak. If someone in authority forces you to go one mile, then go two.

That is exactly what those brilliant black women did who were the computers at NASA in the 60s (Their story has been told in the recent film, *Hidden Figures*). They prevailed through persistence, courage and cleverness.

It was through their active non-violent resistance that they and others broke through the thick barriers of sexism and racism.

If there is anything that should strike us first about Jesus' teaching on non-retaliation it is this: In each and every instance Jesus is providing guidance to those who showed up. You see, you wouldn't need council about how to handle someone slapping you, or taking your things, or forcing you to walk a mile if you were hiding out, flying under the radar, avoiding taking any risks. Those were the things that happened to those who showed up. And for those who have the courage to show up in the face of tyranny, to speak and act when one suffers for it, they are given a road map on how to proceed.

It is the same path practiced by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: Active non-violent resistance. The truth is that the powers and principalities of this world will always attempt to silence such voices, to disappear them. But if they take courage and trust in the power of the Spirit, they will prevail. The arc of justice turns slowly but it turns.

One of the opportunities that non-retaliation provides is *overcoming dualism* – that splitting off into oppositional corners. And the way that non-retaliation, non-duality works, is that it overcomes a habitual way of thinking – at least in Western cultures: **Either-Or thinking**. And I want us to think about how Either-Or thinking contributes to almost every problem that we encounter. And *moving from **Either-Or** thinking to **Both-And** thinking* takes us forward to new solutions ... using active non-violent, consensus building methods.

I want to share **five examples** of current issues that have become highly polarized and how moving from either-or thinking to both-and thinking could move us toward those new solutions.

I'm going to draw these five moral issues (for people of faith these issues are always moral issues) out of the hat in no particular order. And I'm going to draw them out of the hat and present them in the either-or form in the way we most often hear them.

1. Either Gun rights or Gun Control.

We are given a false choice of either maintaining second amendment rights to responsible gun ownership by law abiding citizens OR reasonable controls and limits for gun ownership excluding those who have criminal records or are mentally ill. The issue is framed as though it is either protect second amendment rights OR limit military style assault weapons, accessories and ammo among civilians. Police departments and the vast majority of American citizens know that it is not either-or. Responsible citizens know it is both-and, and yet the issue keeps getting framed as either-or. Clearly it is not.

2. Either Black Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter.

We are given the false choice of either denouncing racism as it manifests itself in police violence toward people of color OR supporting our courageous law enforcement officials who put their lives on the line for us every single day.

The issue is framed as though you can't care about both of those at the same time; that you have to choose one or the other. Of course, that's not true; we clearly can care about both at the same time. But the either-or distortion is that we can't. Compassion and justice leads people of faith to empathize with all who suffer harm and correct the sources of that suffering. Responsible citizens know this is a case of both-and, and yet the issue continues to be framed as either-or. Clearly it is not.

3. Either Pro-Life Anti-Abortion or Pro-Choice Protection of Women's Right to Choose.

This has been one of the most polarized issue in our nation's history. It is always presented as an either—or choice, and in this case placing the two choices on separate ends of the same axis, as though one has to choose one side or the other. In terms of moral theology and social ethics this is false positioning.

There are actually two axis lines – one is the moral issue of abortion itself and the second is the moral issue of who makes decisions for the lives and bodies of women.

As regards the issue of abortion itself, a person can take a position on that spectrum from a never/always wrong/it's taking a life standard to a cavalier/it does matter standard. Inbetween those two poles are more nuanced understandings that weigh the safety of the mother with unborn child or fetus and the anticipated life of an unwanted child. This is the moral spectrum of life and it requires careful theological/ethical consideration to find where one is. I have never, in all my years of serving as a pastor to those facing this issue, known a person who took this issue in a cavalier way.

The second moral axis has to do with who will make the moral decisions. Will it be the woman? Or men in the culture who have power? Or the government? Or some other group who has a different moral stance than the woman involved? Who has the moral agency to make these choices?

That is the second axis and it intersects with the first but is not equivalent to the first.

It is quite possible to be pro-life (valuing the sanctity of life) and at the same time pro-choice (valuing the moral agency of the woman). And people on both spectrums can seek common ground to make sure that unwanted pregnancies are reduced and adoption is readily available, and children are valued and cared for after they are born. None of this is mutually exclusive. All of it matters.

The most destructive thing is to insist that everyone falls on either-or oppositional poles as opposed to finding themselves differently placed on the issue of the sanctity of life, when life begins, who makes the decisions, and how shall we provide for the safe medical treatment of all women regardless. That is much more nuanced and true than the simplistic either-or false choices we are often presented.

4. Either Open Immigration or Security.

We have heard this false choice repeated over and over as an either-or choice.

The issue is often positioned this way: It is not possible to hold two values at the same time. The two values are 1) the safety of our people from external radicalized threats, and 2) America as the land of open welcome to immigrants who come from other places. As the verse from Emma Lazarus says on the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”

Vigilant security is important in dangerous times. At the same time open welcome to the plight, experience and gifts of immigrants is part of our country’s strength and DNA. Both can be pursued at the same time with reason. They are not opposites. One may become more urgent in one historical moment than another but does not eclipse the other. You don’t have to dismantle the Statue of Liberty to feel safe. This is not a case of absolute either-or, one or the other. It is both-and, and a reasonable approach will find the balance.

5. When it comes to extending health care to all our citizens, we have to choose between **either a government run plan or a free market plan.**

This is a question Americans have wrestled with throughout the history of our nation: What solutions come from government and what solutions come from the free market? In almost every aspect it is a blend. How many of you receive Social Security? Medicare? VA benefits? Went to school with the GI Bill? Have disability support? That’s all government. We have a blended economy and blended social system that rocks back and forth depending on the moment.

The answer to our health care and health insurance dilemmas will not be either-or. The ultimate solutions will be a creative both-and. Almost everyone knows that; they just won’t admit it. And so the polarization continues, the dualistic thinking, the either-or language that divides.

Those are five examples of current social/moral issues that are in play right now. They are issues dominated in the public sphere by dualistic, either-or thinking. But each one requires both-and solutions. Who will be the courageous ones to stand in the breach and advocate for a third way?

When Jesus counseled his disciples how to respond in non-retaliatory ways, he was talking to those who were taking the hits because they were willing to show up. They stood on the bow of the ship and took the full force of the waves. His insistence on active non-violence kept the door open for a new future to appear. That is hardest work of all. It's easy to think and act dualistically. But that's not what we're challenged to do. We're challenged to be a different people.

Are you up to it, Church? By the power of the Spirit we are.