Epiphany 7, Year A, February 20, 2011

"The Third Way"

Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the God who loves us: the Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life. Amen.

As most you know, this morning was *supposed* to be the day that I returned to Christ Church after 3 weeks away in Egypt some of which would have been spent meeting and getting to know my Egyptian family members for the very first time. This was a trip that took me an *awfully* long time to get to around to saying "yes" to but was ultimately one that I could honestly say I was very much looking forward to so, needless to say, both Courtney and I were deeply disappointed that we had to postpone. And yet, mixed-in with the disappointment was a real measure of pride given all that has transpired in Egypt over the last few weeks…a new found sense of ethnic pride that I could feel stirring up within me as I sat glued to the television set watching the historic struggle rapidly unfold in Tahrir Square.

Only a week prior to my expected departure, no one could have predicted all that was to come: the downfall of the nearly thirty-year old Mubarak regime and the turmoil that would envelop Egypt but the people of Egypt had clearly had enough. Tired of the repression and corruption and poverty and armed with a passionate desire to improve their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens, Egyptians took to the streets in large numbers knowing that to do so would constitute a great personal risk on their parts. And, as we all saw on the nightly news, many of these protesters *did* ultimately have to suffer state-sanctioned violence in what was clearly a desperate attempt to put them down. Many *did* have to endure great hardships that included beatings and bullets and tear gas and the fire of waters canons all in the name of maintaining order.

But what was most inspiring about all of this was the way in which these Egyptians chose to respond to the violence against them; the way in which they chose to handle themselves in the midst of it all as they attempted to make their voices heard. The narrative that Mubarak had used to maintain power for so long *depended* upon the assumption that, without him, Egyptians would turn to violence – that without him they'd turn on one another and chaos would quickly spread across the country.

And yet, in the face of repeated provocations, the majority of the hundreds of thousands of who ultimately filled downtown Cairo to push back against the state chose to do so non-violently. They refused to strike back – again and again – and, in so doing, disproved the Mubarak narrative and revealed to the world the brutality of his regime.

As such, these Egyptians, the majority of whom are Muslim, became the latest embodiment for us of a challenging teaching that we are all encouraged today to live into as followers of Jesus Christ.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells us, "You have heard that it was said, `An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." And again, "You have heard that it was said, `You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

These were challenging words that upended popular thinking when Jesus first uttered them to his disciples in the context of what we now know as the "Sermon on the Mount" and they are no less challenging and upending for us today.

On the face of it, this advice may strike us as a little bit crazy or perhaps woefully naive; like some invitation to cowardice that is impractical at best and down-right suicidal at worst; an invitation to the victim to continue on being victimized or an invitation to allow bullies or abusers or tyrants or any other like-minded perpetrators to continue their actions unabated without any opposition whatsoever.

But the idea that Jesus would instruct us to live out our lives as passive doormats asking for mistreatment and rampant injustice doesn't seem to jibe very well with the way that we know he lived out *his* life; a life that ultimately led him to die on a cross. Jesus shows us time and again, throughout the gospels, that he was not afraid to stand up to injustice or oppression and was a fierce advocate for those in need. We also know that he was *far* from conflict-averse. So how then are we to interpret this passage from the Gospel today? How are we to make sense of it given the realities of our everyday lives?

The traditional line of thinking holds that there are really only two basic ways that one might respond when faced with danger from someone intending to do us harm; responses that are hire-wired into our DNA: fight or flight. In other words, when faced with an imminent threat, we can either choose to stand up to that threat and actively resist it or we can choose not to resist and get as far away from that threat as humanely possible.

But, as biblical interpreter Walter Wink once pointed out, Jesus is actually trying here to propose an alternative way to respond – a third way; an alternative that is not just a tactic that we might use against a more powerful aggressor, as in the case of the street protests in Egypt, but is rather an alternative that has everything to with how we are called to live our lives as children of God – as followers of Jesus Christ. And that alternative, according to Wink, is persistent and active non-violent resistance to the forces of evil in our world.

Wink goes on to say, "Jesus abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, the oppressor resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed … Jesus reveals here a way to fight evil with all our power without being transformed into the very evil we fight."

In short, this alternative third way is I think a very challenging invitation for us as Christians to begin to try and move beyond the "fight or flight" mentality that naturally emerges out of our instinctive desire for *self*-preservation and for our own personal welfare and the welfare of those that we love the most. We're called as Christians to be more open-hearted than that.

Jesus encourages us today to instead live out our lives in such a way that we become incarnate signs to the power of God's love in the world to overcome all things even things like violence or legal prosecution or kidnapping just to name the few examples provided for us this morning.

In the midst of all the injustices that we might face in our lives be they small and petty like the little daily slights that might get under our skin or be they big and profound like government repression in Egypt or the senseless shooting that happened in Tucson. In the midst of all this, Jesus encourages us to strive for an alternative way of responding and to remember, as we are also encouraged to do so in our Gospel reading, of just how very important it is for us to not only consider our relationships with those that we love but also with those who are strangers, those who we do not know and even those who we do not like. We are called to always consider, whether we like or not, that our own welfare is inextricably linked with the welfare of *all* those around us. How we deal with all of these relationships – with friend and foe alike – count a great deal in the eyes of God because the way in which we choose to live into each of them, walking in the footsteps of Christ, has the power to change not only our own lives but the whole world.

I say again, this is a challenging invitation for us to consider and one that I believe is really impossible to adequately comprehend or make much sense of without the gift of God's love provided to us by the Holy Spirit; a love that is not for the faint of heart but that is ultimately the only place in which we are able to feel truly safe and secure.

I would like to close this morning by inviting you to pray with me using the words of our Collect.

Let us pray,

"O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you." And we ask this for Love's sake. **AMEN.**