

Sara Brubacher

Conrad Grebel University College

Planting Olive Trees:

Giving a Voice to the Voiceless

Finally the rain was stopping! We tumbled out of the small, upstairs room in a rural, Palestinian village. As an eight-year-old child, the whole outing was an adventure: trekking across wet, fresh-smelling terraces; juggling a heavy, but fragile!, olive tree seedling to plant. Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Israelis, Palestinians, and Internationals. We were working together to re-plant an olive grove that had been demolished by Israeli settlers. Living out Jesus' call to be creative peacemakers.

Sometimes the pacifist stance can be confusing. Do not resist? That seems weak, submissive. The stance of someone who will not stand up for what is right in the face of injustice. That does not represent the Jesus I know. This Jesus is a radical, a guy who preached an active, and effective, way of non-violence that turns the world up-side down: giving a voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless and a face to the faceless.

Palestine in Jesus' time was also a land under occupation, although the occupiers and the occupied have changed. On one occasion, Jesus spoke to a large crowd, people with only one thing in common: they are the down-trodden, the voiceless, the occupied.

Matthew chapter 5, verses 38 through 41:

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 evil-doer. 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.

“Do not resist” makes the three subsequent examples seem like acquiescence to oppression.

However, as Walter Wink in *Engaging the Powers* explains, understanding how Jesus’ audience hears these examples reveals them to be creative responses that give the oppressed new power to assert their humanity and take a stand.

In Jesus time, the right hand was the only one used to strike another person. This meant that hitting someone on the right cheek was a backhand slap; a strike of humiliation, used to reprimand inferiors. By “turning the other cheek,” the “inferior” is refusing to accept this status. He refuses to be humiliated, is standing up and proclaiming silently, “I am a human being just like you, and you are going to have to see me as such.”

The next example presents a snap-shot of a courtroom. Someone is being sued, and the only thing he has left to be sued for is his outer coat. He is the poorest of the poor; and in a position many of Jesus’ listeners feared. Debt was wide-spread as the wealthy drove farmers into it through outrageous interest rates, in order to steal their land. Jesus’ response to this injustice? Give them everything! They want your coat? Give them your underwear as well! Only, as he walks out of the courtroom stark naked...he reveals more than himself: he reveals the unjust system and protest it; the creditor’s greed is revealed for what it is, part of an attempt to reduce an entire class to poverty and homelessness. The victim gains a voice.

The third picture Jesus paints for us is also familiar to his audience. Under Roman occupation, soldiers could force civilians to carry their equipment for one mile. This was common, and

commonly abused. So much so that Roman law tried to curb it, giving harsh penalties to soldiers for overly abusing a carrier. So a Jew offering to carry a Roman soldier's bags for an extra mile was unheard of. It made the soldier uncomfortable. He could get in trouble, and did not know how to react; the places were turned around.

None of these responses to common, oppressive measures are passive, weak, or non-resistant. Rather, they are deeply creative answers that turn power on its head. Turning the other cheek presents a difficulty to the striker: to hit again, on the left side, in the strike of an equal, or not. Either way, the point has been made, and cannot be undone, giving a voice to the voiceless. By offering the inner garment, the defenceless person is setting the terms instead of the powerful creditor, giving power to the powerless. Walking the extra mile takes the initiative away from the oppressor, forcing him to view the occupied in a new way, giving a face to the faceless.

Jesus' examples make it clear that "do not resist" does not mean to be passive in the face of injustice, but rather not to resist with violence.

Fast forward two thousand years, back to a wet, terraced landscape. Planting the olive trees has turned out not to be so easy: Israeli settlers called in soldiers to make us stop. The soldiers, uncertain what to do, made a line which they forbade us to cross. While in stalemate, some members of the Christian Peacemaker Team followed the footsteps of Jesus and of many others in creative peacemaking with a radical idea: let the children cross the line and plant olive trees! So we did: my six-year-old brother and eight-year-old self, both conspicuously blonde, along

with several others, took our seedlings, crossed the line and started planting. The soldiers did not know how to react; they were not going to attack children, especially international kids. The officer approached, and we started talking. Somehow I found out he was an archeologist, and since my father is also, I ran excitedly back to get my dad to talk to him, and former “enemies” became friends.

While we were not able to plant many olive trees that day, the action planted other seeds. Eventually, another group returned to that site and was able to plant some olive trees, the way paved by our first attempt. Also, my father and the officer stayed in touch for years, and even helped each other in archeology sites. And one never knows what seeds were planted in the hearts and minds of the soldiers. Many Israeli soldiers have since refused to serve in the occupied territories, having come to believe that military occupation is not the way to gain Israeli security.

Even more importantly, that day allowed Palestinians to protest the occupation and confiscation of their land in a way that turns power on it’s head. The soldiers did not know what to do when faced with children carrying olive trees, a symbol of peace and hope.

This action did not end the Israeli occupation of Palestine, just as Jesus’ examples did not end the Roman occupation. But these are actions that everyone can do. They create the opportunity for reconciliation, and respond to violence with a power that is even stronger: the power of love.

As Jesus said immediately after giving those examples of creative resistance, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” To love is actively to seek for the care and well-being of others, to actually have their best interests at heart. This action love starts outward, and moves inward. It changes hearts and leads to reconciliation, and the enemy is no longer an enemy.

As Christians, we are called to continue this creativity in our responses to evil. To love our enemy. To give a voice to the voiceless.