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I invite you to pick up your RED HYMNAL and turn with me to Psalm 37.
Let's read verses 1-6 in unison:

Do not be provoked by evildoers;
do not be jealous of those who do wrong.
For they shall soon wither like the grass,
and like the green grass fade away.
Put your trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and find safe pasture.
Take delight in the LORD,
who shall give you your heart's desire.
Commit your way to the LORD;
put your trust in the LORD, and see what God will do.
The LORD will make your vindication as clear as the light
and the justice of your case like the noonday sun.

PRAYER:
Deep challenges are upon us these days, O Lord.
Challenges that find many of us upset, anxious, and bewildered.

The ground beneath us is shifting. The order of the world as we've known it is changing swiftly and dramatically, and we wonder what the consequences will be for our families, our nation, our world.

In these uncertain times, keep our faith grounded in your LOVE for us and for this world, as revealed in Jesus. Set our feet on the solid conviction that your work of repairing the world continues still; and that you call us, through the Holy Spirit, to courageously join you in this work.

Give us assurance that you are with us in the struggle, and that your just reign, your dream for the Earth will not perish. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Psalm 37 is becoming a mantra for me these days.

DO NOT BE PROVOKED BY EVILDOERS;
FOR THEY SHALL SOON WITHER LIKE THE GRASS.
PUT YOUR TRUST IN THE LORD,
AND SEE WHAT GOD WILL DO.

It's a mantra Joseph from our Genesis reading surely could have claimed, when his life was turned upside down after he was trafficked by his own brothers; when, after hitting bottom in the dungeon of a foreign jail his talent for interpreting dreams opened a path to a new future.

That this future would include an eventual reunion and reconciliation with his brothers must have seemed emotionally and logistically impossible.

But after years on divergent paths, God brought them together, and the power of forgiveness turned dead ends into an open door.

"God sent me before you to preserve life," he told his brothers. "To preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."

Was God the author of the brothers' evil acts? NO.
Did God find a way to redeem their acts and transform evil to Good? YES.

Do not be provoked by evildoers.
Put your trust in the Lord, and see what God will do.

Last week we heard the first installment of JESUS' SERMON ON THE PLAIN recorded in Luke's gospel—a sermon marked by BLESSINGs and WOE's. This week we get part two.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

It's a hard sell – what Jesus puts before the growing multitude would-be followers.
Love your enemies…do good to haters…?! Who wants to sign on to *that* commission?!

It's a DANGEROUS passage when we don't understand it, especially so for women who, too often, have been told that being faithful *requires* them to stay in abusive relationships.

That's not what Jesus is saying here.

Last Monday I joined 150 others at a RESISTANCE TRAINING EXERCISE in the U-District.

The assumption behind the training is that the sweeping actions by the Trump Administration are an attack on democratic and constitutional norms and must be opposed, and that this opposition will inevitably require confrontation and acts of purposeful, non-violent civil disobedience.

With fascism and autocracy on the rise, old alliances being upended and fundamental democratic values on the chopping block, what's needed in this moment is not WAIT AND SEE caution but a strategy for ENGAGEMENT.

According to theologian Walter Wink, Jesus' teaching on resistance to evil is perhaps the most misunderstood teaching in all of the Bible.

Both Luke and Matthew share this same material and it's what's before us today.

Luke's Jesus says:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Matthew adds:

Do not resist one who is evil.

These passages have often been understood to be coaching non-resistance.

The phrase translated: "Do not resist one who is evil," has often been misinterpreted to mean simply "let them run all over you."

But Jesus could not have meant that. For Jesus resisted evil with every fiber of his being. There's not a single instance in the gospels in which Jesus fails to resist evil when he encounters it.

When Jesus says DO NOT RESIST EVIL, there's something stronger than simply resisting at stake. He's telling us "do not resist evil on its own terms."

In other words, don't let your opponent dictate the terms of your opposition; don't adopt the tactics of those you oppose. Don't resist violently, or you will turn into the very thing you hate.

Both in Luke and in Matthew, Jesus gives examples of what he means.
And the one I want to examine with you, with the help of Walter Wink, is this:
IF ANYONE STRIKES YOU ON THE CHEEK, OFFER THE OTHER ALSO.

Matthew adds a little detail that looms large in helping us understand this:
IF ANYONE STRIKES YOU THE RIGHT CHEEK, TURN THE OTHER ALSO.

Now imagine if I were your assailant and I were to strike a blow with my right fist at your face, which cheek would it land on? It would land on your LEFT.

But the left cheek is the wrong cheek according to Matthew's detail,
for Jesus says, IF ANYONE STRIKES YOU ON THE RIGHT CHEEK.

Now I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a LEFT HOOK, but that would be impossible in Jewish society because the LEFT HAND was used only for unclean tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public.

The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the BACK OF MY HAND.
A blow with the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure…
it's a symbolic blow—intended to put you back where you belong…
…and it's invariably delivered from a position of power:
by a master to a slave, a parent to a child, a Roman to a Jew.

What Jesus is saying is, in effect:
WHEN SOMEONE TRIES TO HUMILIATE YOU AND PUT YOU DOWN, PUT YOU IN YOUR PLACE, TURN YOUR OTHER CHEEK. **In other words, refuse the play their game.**

By turning the other cheek you are defiantly saying to the person,
I REFUSE TO BE HUMILIATED BY YOU ANY LONGER.
I AM A HUMAN BEING—JUST LIKE YOU,
YOU CAN'T PUT ME DOWN EVEN IF YOU HAVE ME KILLED.

Turning the other cheek is hardly a tactic for avoiding trouble!
This is active resistance that meets violent tactics head on.

It's this kind of non-violent resistance that hastened the liberation of India from British rule; that hastened the liberation of our country from racist laws; and that hastened the liberation of South Africa from the ideology of apartheid.

What Jesus is articulating here is a way of living in the world—a way of overcoming domination—by a means that will not just create new forms of violence.

In the past, we may have thought we had only two choices—
EITHER resist evil violently, OR don't resist at all.

But Jesus shows us a third way. A way he himself put to practice on Calvary.

In the aftermath of that event, after his own community denied, betrayed, and deserted him, and God himself seemed to have forsaken him; when he breathed his last and was buried in the tomb with all that he'd hoped and dreamed for this world...

JUST THEN the Sovereign God spoke a NEW WORD!

A WORD that created out of nothing a whole new world of possibility.

An act of divine imagination whose power to transform is still being unleashed in the world — ARISE!

Practicing MERCY with enemies isn't about becoming a doormat for abuse nor giving in to unjust, greedy, and selfish conduct.

Practicing MERCY is about sharing in the transforming power God released in the RESURRECTION!

This way of LIVING and LOVING begins with CLAIMING WHO WE ARE,
and REFUSING to be treated as anything less than HOLY; anything less than BELOVED OF GOD.

The strategy of autocrats is to beat down on people, create fear, unleash anxiety, steal hope. It is a zero sum game in which a select few win and the vast majority lose.

Such a strategy can never be a recipe for greatness.

Jesus enlarges the vocabulary of our common life.
In the ecology of God, says Jesus, no beat down is required.

ALL FLOURISHING IS MUTUAL. And finding a way to live compassionately and generously is ever God's invitation.

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Amen.