

T-SHIRT THEOLOGY: "FIRST THEY IGNORE YOU..."
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, June 2006

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win". Mahatma Gandhi, who spoke these words many times in the course of his life's work, was a passionate advocate of nonviolence.

Using the tool of nonviolent, passive resistance, Gandhi and his compatriots changed the British Empire, restored India to its own sovereignty, and in doing so, reminded the world that there are better ways to achieve one's ends than violence.

Following in Gandhi's footsteps, Martin Luther King Jr. also used nonviolent resistance to achieve significant gains in civil rights for African American citizens. Yet the use of nonviolence as a technique has faded in recent times. Violence, ranging from passive aggressive or belligerent behavior on one end of the scale to massive destruction on the other, has become a way of life around the globe today.

We think of violence as being out there somewhere, but very likely most of us have been the victim of a bully, for example. At school as a kid, in the workplace as an adult, in a love relationship or friendship, there are many places we encounter bullies, people who beat up on us physically or psychologically or verbally. And bullying is a form of violent behavior.

Bullying is endemic in the world today. Not only do we see it in individuals, we also see it in communities, in nations, and in groups of nations. In my opinion, it stems from loss and fear---loss of dignity, of security, of trust, fear of shame, of abandonment, of pain. And it is no surprise to learn that bullies have often been the victims of bullying themselves. This is a scenario we have seen played out many times.

On the global stage, we see Israel, a nation of people victimized repeatedly over centuries of history, now persecuting and oppressing Palestinians.

On the religious stage, Christians, once the target of lions and Roman gladiators, now form the sanctimonious radical religious right, attacking sexual minorities and others who don't fit their narrow worldview.

On the gender stage, men and women trade jokes and insults directed at the opposite sex, by whom they have felt marginalized.

On the culture stage, young men and women shaped by poverty and oppression join gangs and terrorize cities and neighborhoods.

And on the political stage, dirty tricks and smear campaigns have come to characterize each election season.

Of course, not all Jews nor Christians nor men and women nor young persons nor politicians behave in these ways, but fear and loss drive many in these groups to become bullies and act out their pain.

We ourselves struggle with the temptation to get even, to settle a score, to fight back, to avenge a wrong. We may not give in to the desire to hurt, but the anger and sense of betrayal are not easy to let go of.

Mahatma Gandhi's wisdom seems hard to fathom in a world where violent vengeance is common and a nonviolent alternative seems impossible. Yet this small, ascetic man, committed to passive resistance as his only weapon, changed the course of history and inspired the civil rights movement in this country and in others suffering under the yoke of oppression.

Sometimes our grasp of wisdom comes in odd ways. Let me share a funny story with you, from my own past. I realized, as I was writing this sermon, that I had stumbled upon Gandhi's useful wisdom quite accidentally, growing up.

It was the 50's, and my family had just moved from Portland Oregon to Athena, out in northeastern Oregon. As luck would have it, a few weeks before our move, I had broken my wrist and I was sporting a cast on my left arm on that first day of school.

So into that classroom at Athena Grade school that day I marched, extroverted, bright, smart-alecky and a preacher's kid with a cast on my arm, which I unfortunately proceeded to show off by hitting (lightly, I swear!) my new classmates on the head. Needless to say, this did not get me off to a good start.

In mild retaliation, as the year progressed, my fellow students discovered that my name, Elizabeth (or Betsy, as my parents called me) was fertile ground for nicknames and they got me good. Whether it was Lizzy or Lizard or Betsy Wetsy or Betsy Ketchupbottle or Ketchum and Kissum or Ketchy Belchum or Ketchy Belchum from the Belchum Congo, I became the most nicknamed kid in school, much to my humiliation.

My classmates didn't think anything of it. Kids tease each other and they were not more cruel than others. And most of the time I just kept my mouth shut, but when the cutest boy in school turned down my invitation to a Sunday School party, saying derisively that he wouldn't go anywhere with Betsy Catgut, I cried long and hard on my mother's shoulder.

In high school the names continued and every time I objected, I got the astonished response, “but I was just teasing, can’t you take a joke?” and the names would continue. I was constrained by my position as a preacher’s kid and unable to take a swing at anyone because of my father’s position in town. It was the other preacher’s kids who were the hellions. We Ketcham kids were the good ones and revenge was taboo.

In junior year, I became interested in public speaking and joined the high school speech team. This was a lot of fun, and I was assigned to develop an after-dinner speech to enter in the local contest. Our coach told me that after-dinner speeches were personal, humorous, and entertaining.

So I wrote my speech, practiced it, and in a stuffy classroom at Pendleton High School one spring day, I won first place, as I stood up before a roomful of strangers and gave my speech. I even was selected to go to the State Speech Contest in Corvallis after winning again at the semifinals in LaGrande.

Later that spring, there was an assembly at my high school, where all the winners were invited to give their speeches, to the acclamation of our peers. I stood up, looked out at the crowd of friends and harassers, kids who had teased me mercilessly for years about my name (now you know why I go by Kit), and gave my prize-winning speech, taking all the years of painful teasing and embarrassment and making it into an after-dinner speech---personal, humorous, and entertaining---, and beginning, “I have always seemed to attract a lot of nicknames.....”

By the end of the speech, I felt vindicated. I had not insulted my tormentors nor admitted defeat; I had simply taken a situation that for most kids is very painful and had turned it into something personal, humorous, and entertaining--an after-dinner speech. I was never teased about my name again.

I suspect we all have our ways of dealing nonviolently with situations that make us angry or embarrassed. I hope some of you will be willing to share your secrets with us one of these days.

But let's take another look at the t-shirt's slogan: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

I see this happening right now in our state, where we have been engaged in a struggle with the religious right to keep intact our landmark legislation protecting sexual minorities' civil rights.

Initially, the question of equal rights for sexual minorities was ignored and disregarded. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender folk were too scared to come out of the closet and ask for the same rights as every other American citizen.

It was dangerous; a teacher could lose her job if her principal thought she was a lesbian. A coach could be fired if he was accused of being gay. A transgender person was considered a freak and an affront to nature, for who could imagine a man wishing to be a woman? And bisexuals? Weren't they considered to be the ultimate sexual threat, since they were attracted to both males and females? No wonder sexual minorities were closeted; they were in danger if they revealed themselves.

So we all ignored the problem of equal rights for sexual minorities. I did too, until I met gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender friends and realized that I had rights that they didn't have. And it wasn't fair.

Once it became impossible to ignore people with a different sexual orientation or gender identity, it became common to laugh at them, to use ugly words to ridicule anyone suspected of being gay or anyone whose behavior we didn't approve of. Jokes with homosexual themes are rampant among those who are uncomfortable with sexual diversity.

"God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" go the conservative preachers as they ridicule those who advocate for marriage equality. "You're so gay" taunts the teenage boy who thinks his friend is doing something weird. "Lezzie" directed at girls who spend too much time with their best friend.

When we ridicule something, we are indicating that we are nervous about it, that we hope to deflect interest away from it, make it less threatening and less appealing to others and to ourselves, distance ourselves from it. When people ridicule sexual minorities, they are displaying their discomfort and lack of self-confidence. It may even be that those who ridicule the most are the most terrified that they themselves may be gay.

As more and more states are challenged by same sex couples who want marriage equality, the level of anxiety goes up in those who are afraid of equal rights for sexual minorities. Across the U.S. today other states besides ours are sending cases challenging Defense of Marriage Acts to their State Supreme Courts, as we await our court's decision.

In this way, the bullies begin to fight the ones they fear. Congress undertook, in this fearful climate, to try to enact a Constitutional Amendment, defining marriage as between one man and one woman, an effort which has failed for now.

The fighting goes on in other venues as well: Rev. Fred Phelps of Kansas sends his henchmen to picket AIDS victims, PRIDE events, marches supporting same-sex couples, displaying hateful messages and shouting insults. Physical assault of sexual minorities, even though a hate crime, goes on daily.

And then, Tim Eyman and his willing constituents in the religious right put together a referendum aimed at repealing the hard-won legislation protecting the civil rights of sexual minorities, of people we love who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. Fortunately, he lost this battle.

How do we rise to this occasion? How do we go to bat to overcome this kind of hate and fear? How do we respond to bullies who use their religion to hurt others? How do we reject bullies without becoming bullies ourselves? And how do we do it nonviolently?

My initial reaction to Eyman's proposed referendum has been disgust and anger, disgust at the fear and ignorance that breed this kind of behavior, disgust at his manipulation of that fear and ignorance in people who trust their churches to guide them properly, disgust that he is basically out to make a buck off of fear and ignorance.

And I feel angry because he succeeded in translating that fear and ignorance into such media events as “Sound the Alarm”, on May 21st of this year, when conservative pastors asked their congregations to sign Eyman’s referendum petitions in church and “Marriage Protection Sunday” -----last Sunday, June 4, when scared pastors and parishioners who are unable to envision a world safe for sexual minorities, were asked to foster discrimination and inequality.

You can tell that I can get pretty worked up about this. And I am not quite sure what I can do. I think I need another t-shirt, one that says, “WWGD-----what would Gandhi do?”

Because one of the things I know about myself, and I see it in myself too often, is that when I win-----and I do think we ARE going to win by ensuring civil rights for sexual minorities and by securing marriage equality for all couples, eventually-----when I win, I often get cocky and I am likely to do exactly what “they” have done to me.

I ignore their discomfort, I ridicule them by making fun of their fear and ignorance, I feel superior because I won, and when that happens, I have actually lost something very important-----I have temporarily lost my ability to be compassionate and I have become a bully. I have forgotten that once I was down and it didn’t feel good. I have moved from being a victim to being a victimizer.

And when I become a bully, a victimizer, even though I may not hit anyone or deny them civil rights, even though my actions may only be verbal and private, I have lost something of myself.

What would Gandhi do if he were faced with the kind of situation we face here in this state at this moment in time? What if he, or Martin Luther King Jr., were leading us in this struggle for civil rights for all? What have we learned about the wisdom of a measured response to fear and ignorance and hate?

Gandhi offered several principles of nonviolent resistance which have been restated many ways, but I like this version particularly:

1. maintain respect for the opponent as a human being.
2. care for everyone involved in a conflict.
3. refuse to harm, damage or degrade people or living things or the earth.
4. if suffering is inevitable, be willing to take it on yourself rather than inflict it on others; don't offer violence in return for violence.
5. believe that everyone is capable of change.
6. appeal to the opponents' humanity
7. recognize that no one has a monopoly on truth; find the commonalities between our truth and their truth.
8. believe that the means must be consistent with the ends, that how we arrive at a solution is as important as the solution.
9. be open, rather than operating in secrecy.

As a founding member of the Religious Coalition for Equality, I have had the great good fortune to work with other clergy and laity who are involved in this struggle to secure equal rights for all persons. We have wrestled with these principles as we have worked together and I can tell you that it is easier to retaliate, to condemn, to insult and ridicule those who don't agree with us than it is to recognize and care for people like Rev. Ken Hutcherson or Rev. Joseph Fuiten and their congregants.

But we forge on, correcting our mistakes, helping each other when we are tempted to demonize our opponents, deploring the behavior but not the person.

I would ask your help in this. I would ask you to think seriously about how you can support the issues and causes you care about, like the civil rights issues of the present day, the environmental concerns, the integrity of our elected officials and the process by which we elect them, the ongoing slaughter in Iraq and the deep concern for the well being of our troops.

Our opponents on these issues are human beings, not demons. They have inherent worth and dignity. Can we find a common ground? Can we listen for understanding to another truth? Can we appeal to our common humanity and find solutions that do not harm each other?

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #121 "WE'LL BUILD A LAND"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering to examine our responses to others in light of Gandhi's, King's, Jesus's, and other great prophets' admonitions, to turn the other cheek, to resist but not to retaliate, to offer to listen instead of to argue. May we see our opponents with new insight and may we work with them to find a better way than the polarized world we live in today. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.