

Take the High Road! You might think this means stay on High Street, and soon it will become High Road! (Taking High Street and High Road actually IS good advice when side roads are slippery!) But of course I'm not being literal, and I'm pointing to a symbolic meaning. It usually means something like "When someone is offending you, don't sling mud back, an eye for an eye, but choose the higher ground, choose to respond with better angels.

Of course this is what Jesus was saying in our gospel lesson, "Love even your enemies, Do good to those who hurt you." Jesus says it is nothing special to love those who love you back, nothing special to do good to those who are good to you in return. He speaks of the ideal Love, a love for any neighbor in a ditch, and love for even enemies. The apostle Paul echoes a Proverb when he says "Do not repay evil for evil... If your enemies are hungry feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. By doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." Burning coals? I think the idea is that being kind and good to one who has been hurtful may cause recognition of sin, shame, even remorse or repentance for bad behavior.

Loving enemies. I think most of us like to think that we have very few actual enemies. I hope that is true. As always with the Bible, we need to look at the spiritual level; we may not have literal enemies right now, but I'll bet we can all think of a person or persons who "rub us the wrong way," or one who has said insulting things about us, or who disagrees with us so much that encounters feel more like fights. We could interpret Jesus' words to mean "Love our adversaries, our detractors, our critics!"

Regarding “overcoming evil with good,” I think that Martin Luther King Jr. followed this ideal and we may recall his famous words about loving the white man. Yes, loving those who were still segregating them, sicking dogs on them, even hanging them. He said: *“The black man must love the white man, because the white man needs the black man's love to remove his fears.”* Jesus was an extremist for love, “Do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who abuse you.”

The ideals of Jesus are so high that the best we can do is aspire to them, strive for them, pray for them. We cannot love as Jesus loved without God’s help. Once in awhile, there are people on the human plane who seems to approximate these high ideals. St. Francis of Assisi, in this famous prayer that we just sang: *“I pray I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood and to understand, to be loved as to love!”* Mahatma Ghandi taught the high road of nonviolence and practiced it. Martin Luther King Jr. learned from Mahatma Ghandi. And MLKJr. taught Congressman John Lewis ... Black civil rights leaders studied Jesus and Ghandi thoroughly, about keeping the high road of love or at least good will toward all, before they went on any marches or sit-ins. They vowed not to retaliate, not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good.

A word of caution is necessary here. Though Jesus preached the ideal of nonviolent love, and practiced what he preached, we know that Jesus did *resist* evil. He did get angry and did say harsh words to his own religious leaders who had power. We remember that he turned over tables when the temple became too mercenary. We understand that Jesus did not want to do harm with his confrontations, but Jesus surely did confront

and resist the powers of his time. His protests and confrontations were against the religious leaders and the money-changers at the temple. We could easily say that Jesus was involved in institutional protest, confronting “systems” of that society. *In our day*, nonviolent protests do make sense, when any government is hurting people, or creating laws that hurt people. Each of us can discern what parts of our government seem unfair or destructive, and resist as Henry David Thoreau advocated in his essay “Civil Disobedience.”

Thinking of evil on a personal level, there are indeed bullies and people with mental illness intent on causing harm to others. Thus, there are good reasons for *restraining orders* in our personal relationships. There are good reasons for *firm boundaries*. It is often said, we may forgive so and so, but we do not have to be his friend. We may love her, as in wish the best for her, but not need to continue a relationship. And surely we know that love sometimes needs to be “tough love.” We need to say NO to behavior that is harmful.

Caution about Jesus self-sacrificing love and doing good to those who abuse you... is especially important for women. Since I cannot identify fully, being a male, so I quote Jane Schaberg, professor of religious studies, on this Gospel reading: “*Pride and the will to power are not the principal temptations for women, who are more apt to accept for themselves the roles prescribed by society... acquiescing in their own powerlessness, sacrificing rather than developing their own selves. Luke 6:29 counsels offering the other cheek. Luke also added the word “daily” to the counsel about taking up the your cross, implying **sacrificial living**. These texts in Luke are not meant to glorify suffering or victimization, but **they have been used this way.**” Too many*

women (and some men) have stayed in abusive relationships, due to an overly-literal interpretation of sacrificial love. The Good News of Jesus' way is also resistance and firm boundaries.

From the personal back to the societal... all abuse of power must be resisted. Anything that harms or takes away the dignity of a human being (We are made in God's image) must be resisted. Following Jesus, Ghandi, MLK and so many others, any protest or demonstration must of course be nonviolent, peaceful, not returning not evil for evil. Both Moses and Paul state that we are not to seek revenge, but that vengeance belongs to God. Moses says: "The time is near when their foot shall slip!" (Dt.32:35).

In today's polarizations, we do well to keep all political disagreements at a civil level. If the temperature gets too high, best to drop it, at least until another time. This is the high road, wishing the *best* that life has to offer towards all we encounter.

Footnote: I used to be a bit quizzical of letters closing with the word "Best." Do they mean I give you *my* best, or I wish you *your* best? I'm a minister of the Word. Words matter. What is really meant, and whatever happened to "Sincerely yours?" But after more thought, I say it can be a wonderful sign. We wish another the *ultimate* best, all that life and God have to offer. We wish you God's best, as we wish the same for ourselves. "Love your neighbor as yourself." I think this is the High Road, to love everyone, *wish the very best for them*, even those with whom we need to keep some firm boundaries! Amen.