

In Alagamar, Brazil, a group of peasants organized a long-term struggle to preserve their lands against attempts at illegal expropriation by national and international firms (with the connivance of local politicians and the military). Some of the peasants were arrested and jailed in town. Their companions decided they were all equally responsible, so hundreds marched to town and filled the house of the judge, demanding to be jailed with those who had been arrested. The judge was finally obliged to send them all home, including the prisoners.<sup>11</sup>

Another, one that Jesus himself must have known and that may have served as a model for his examples: In 26 C.E., when Pontius Pilate brought the imperial standards into Jerusalem and displayed them at the Fortress Antonio overlooking the Temple, all Jerusalem was thrown into a tumult. These “effigies of Caesar that are called standards” not only infringed on the commandment against images but were the particular gods of the legions. Jewish leaders requested their removal. When Pilate refused, a large crowd of Jews “fell prostrate around his house and

for five whole days and nights remained motionless in that position.” On the sixth day, Pilate assembled the multitude in the stadium with the apparent intention of answering them. Instead, his soldiers surrounded the Jews in a ring three deep. As Josephus tells it,

Pilate, after threatening to cut them down, if they refused to admit Caesar’s images, signaled to the soldiers to draw their swords. Thereupon the Jews, as by concerted action, flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready rather to die than to transgress the law. Overcome with astonishment at such intense religious zeal, Pilate gave orders for the immediate removal of the standards from Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

About 150 village women shut down most of a multinational oil company’s operations in Nigeria for nearly a week. They commandeered a ChevronTexaco staff ferry to sneak into the company’s

Escravos pipeline terminal. The unarmed women continued to occupy the terminal, stopping exports and trapping about 700 workers inside. The women wanted jobs for their sons and electricity in their impoverished homes in this, the world's sixth-largest oil exporter nation. When planes would land, the women would surround them so they couldn't take off again. Other teams of women shut down the docks and helicopter pads. Poorest of the poor, these mothers discovered the power of numbers, and, as of this writing, still had the upper hand (July 15, 2002, *New York Times*, A1).

Here is an example that deals with the perennial problem of bullying, as told by the mother in one of our workshops. Her son was the smallest kid in his class, and he was afflicted with chronic sinusitis. On his school bus there was a bully who was terrorizing all the kids. Finally, one day the boy had had it with the bully. He blew his nose into his right hand, then walked toward the bully, extending his hand, and saying, "I've always wanted to shake the hand of a real bully." The bully began to

back up to the back of the bus, where he meekly sat down and never bothered anyone on that bus again, because that nose was always at the ready. What I like about this story is the way the boy used his weakness as a strength. Just as Jesus taught, he took the momentum of evil and used it to throw his opponent.

The nurses in a hospital in Saskatchewan were tired of being browbeaten, corrected in front of patients, and generally made to feel inferior by the doctors on staff. The nurses put their heads together and came up with a plan. They went to a sympathetic administration and set up a "pink alert," which would be transmitted over the intercom the next time a doctor started abusing a nurse. From all over the hospital, nurses who were free converged on the scene, surrounded the doctor, holding hands, and waited for him to make the first move. He located the smallest nurse and plunged toward her. But the circle merely gave with his charge. He tried another nurse; same result. It became like the childhood game Red Rover. The circle was like an

amoeba that simply gave with his every move. Finally he dropped his hands, acquiescing in their lesson. That pretty much took care of that problem from then on out, for their circle, like the boy's nose, was ready at a moment's notice.

It is important to repeat such stories in order to extend our imaginations for creative nonviolence. Since it is not a natural response, we need to be schooled in it. We need models, and we need to rehearse it in our daily lives if we ever hope to resort to it in crises.

Sadly, Jesus' three examples have been turned into laws, with no reference to the utterly changed contexts in which they were being applied. His attempt to nerve the powerless to assert their humanity under inhuman conditions has been turned into a legalistic prohibition on schoolyard fistfights between peers. Pacifists and those who reject pacifism alike have tended to regard Jesus' infinitely malleable insights as iron rules, the one group urging that they be observed inflexibly, the other treating them as impossible demands intended to break us

and catapult us into the arms of grace. The creative, ironic, playful quality of Jesus' teaching has thus been buried under an avalanche of humorless commentary. And as always, law kills.

How many a battered wife has been counseled, on the strength of a legalistic reading of this passage, to "turn the other cheek," when what she needs, according to the spirit of Jesus' words, is to find a way to restore her own dignity and end the vicious circle of humiliation, guilt, and bruising. She needs to assert some sort of control in the situation and force her husband to regard her as an equal, or get out of the relationship altogether. The victim needs to recover her self-worth and seize the initiative from her oppressor. And he needs to be helped to overcome his violence. The most creative and loving thing she could do, at least in the American setting, might be to have him arrested. "Turn the other cheek" is not intended as a legal requirement to be applied woodenly in every situation, but as the impetus for discovering creative alternatives that transcend the only two

that we are conditioned to perceive: submission or violence, flight or fight.

Shortly after I was promoted from the “B” team to the varsity basketball squad in high school, I noticed that Ernie, the captain, was missing shot after shot from the corner because he was firing it like a bullet. So, helpfully I thought, I shouted, “Arch it, Ernie, arch it.” His best friend, Ham, thought advice from a greenhorn impertinent, and from that day on verbally sniped at me without letup. I had been raised a Christian, so I “turned the other cheek.” To each sarcastic jibe I answered with a smile or soft words. This confused Ham somewhat; by the end of the season he lost his taste for taunts.

It was not until four years later that I suddenly woke to the realization that I had not loved Ham into changing. The fact was, *I hated his guts*. It might have been far more creative for me to have challenged him to a fistfight. Then he would have had to deal with me as an equal. But I was *afraid* to fight him, though the fight would probably have been a draw. I was scared I might get

hurt. I was hiding behind the Christian “injunction” to “turn the other cheek,” rather than asking, “What is the most creative, transformative response to this situation?” Perhaps I had done the right thing for the wrong reason, but I suspect that creative nonviolence can never be a genuinely moral response unless we are capable of first entertaining the possibility of violence and consciously saying “No.” Otherwise our nonviolence may actually be a mask for cowardice, as it most certainly was for me.

The oppressed of the third world are justifiably suspicious that we of the first world are more concerned with avoiding violence than with realizing justice. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Peréz Esquivel comments, “What has always caught my attention is the attitude of the peace movement in Europe and the United States, where nonviolence is envisioned as the final objective. Nonviolence is not the final objective. Nonviolence is a lifestyle. The final objective is humanity. It is life.”<sup>13</sup>



## For Discussion

1. What strikes you as new in this discussion of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence?
2. Were you taught to be cowardly by the "doormat for Jesus" interpretation of this text?
3. If you have children, how might you help them deal creatively with bullying?
4. Do role-plays of Jesus' three examples of nonviolence. You might plant someone in the group who has on a swimsuit or jogging shorts who can play the role of the debtor.