

Matthew 5: 38-42 “Jesus as Jester” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/8/26

This past week, I attended a 2-hour community education event by Shasta College called “Uncorking Comedy,” led by a speech professor and amateur comedian. There were about 12 of us, a nice holy number, with 2 of us being preachers. We sat in the back row and laughed more than anyone else, probably because we know how hard it is to get folks to laugh these days. The professor started off with a question I have often asked myself, “Why do we refer to dead people as the ‘late’ Mrs. Jones, the ‘late’ Rev. Jackson? Are we expecting them to show up at some point, just running late?” Our choice of words is such a telling piece of our understanding of life... and death. The event got me thinking about all the humorous things in the Bible, like the Adam and Eve story of last week. I was reminded of the necessity to see the comical in God’s stories or we are missing out. It may come as a surprise to you but today’s lesson from the Sermon on the Mount is just one of those cases. In order to help you better understand, we need some context to the 3 scenes Jesus sketches out in regards to turning the cheek, giving your undergarment, and going the second mile. I first heard this in a seminar by Walter Wink in the early 1990’s and its been verified by archaeological and biblical scholars ever since. You must first understand Jesus is speaking to an audience who has known oppression, who have been the inferior ones in relation to those in power. So now I’m going to require some help to play this out, and I need a volunteer from the congregation... any brave souls willing to join me up front here?

Scene One: (to volunteer) Please pretend to strike me on my left cheek and know that I am a subordinate to you. In that society, I might be a woman, child, or Jew, so you will choose to use your backhand to discipline me. Backhanded hits were always considered more demeaning and thus preferred. They were used to punish inferiors, and I will most likely cower in submission. However, if I were your equal, you would instead use open-handed aggression because striking a peer with the back of the hand will cost you between a day’s to an entire year’s worth of wages depending on your stance. Open-handed or front fists were reserved for those with equal status. So

let's give it a try... (I can't believe I'm doing this!) Jesus tells me to turn the other cheek so now I offer you my right cheek. Do it again... However, you cannot use your left hand, because left hands were used only for unclean tasks. Even to gesture with the left hand carried the penalty of ten days penance. By encouraging me to turn the other cheek, Jesus robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate me as I effectively respond, "Try again – your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect and I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human just like you and your status doesn't alter that fact." And so the aggressor is in a pickle, because how will this person hit the other cheek which is now turned toward them? Backhanded hits to the upturned cheek become near to impossible. Front-handed hits will change my status in society from being an inferior to an equal, and the whole point was to use the back of the hand in order to reinforce the inequality between us. Even if a superior orders the person flogged for such "cheeky" behavior, the point has been made. I am, in fact, a human being and deserve to be treated as such. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything that is humiliating."

Scene Two – Giving the outer and undergarment –The poorest of the poor, upon negotiating loans with creditor, find themselves unable to pay and so creditors bring them to court. The debtors seek deeper into poverty while the creditors get payment by legal means. The poor only have the garments on their backs to give as collateral for loans. Jewish law strictly required that an outer garment be returned every evening at sunset. So the judge says the debtors must give their outer garments every day to the creditors, but Jesus says to take it a step further, and give their undergarments as well. Imagine the laughs as his listeners imagine the scene: The defendant strips off all their clothing and marches out of court naked. There stands the creditor, covered with shame at this individual being stripped naked, something forbidden in Jewish law, holding the poor debtor's outer garment in one hand and the undergarment in the other. The debtors will say in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything? Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?" Meanwhile, the creditors will be trying to cover up the debtors in horror, knowing that the shame of

nakedness fell more on the person viewing or causing the nakedness than on the naked people themselves. This would reveal the creditor to be an illegitimate moneylender, one who would reduce an entire social class to landlessness, destitution, and abasement. Thus, we have a poor person who accepts the laws as they stand, pushes them to absurdity, and reveals them for what they have become, all with a bit of ironic humor. It the process of turning the tables on injustice.

Scene 3 – Going the Second Mile. This word of encouragement comes out of the relatively enlightened practice of limiting the amount of forced labor Roman soldiers could inflict on inferior people. This forced labor was a cause of bitter resentment for all of Rome’s subjects with stories of entire villages fleeing to avoid being forced into carrying soldiers’ baggage, and richer towns paying large sums of money to escape having Roman soldiers take up residence in their towns during the winter months. So in order to at least minimize some of the bitterness in conquered lands, Rome made a tiny stipulation telling soldiers they couldn’t oppress the inferiors by asking them to carry their bags for more than one mile. Jesus tries once more to find a way for the persecuted to keep their dignity while giving them the power of choice within their predicament. So imagine the soldier’s surprise when, at the next mile marker, the soldier reluctantly reaches for his pack saying, “Ok, that’s enough. We’ve gone one mile. You can put it down and return to your business.” But the person carrying the equipment says, “Oh, I’d be happy to carry it a second mile.” “What? You can’t – it’s against the law!” “But I’d really like to help you out. Please let me carry it another mile.” “Hey, I could get in trouble for that – be fined or flogged. What are you up to?” “I just want to help out. Could I please carry the equipment another mile?” And so the person does, it gets reported by an observant bystander and that soldier is punished. What do you think the odds are that the same soldier asks anyone again to carry his pack?

Charles Campbell says that as we hear Jesus share these teachings with his followers, we can almost imagine him like a comedian or a jester who holds a fundamentally different perspective on the world. A jester is someone who sees the

world in odd or unusual ways, often from the place of an outsider. And through often comical antics, the jester seeks to startle and dislocate people, so they might be set free from all the presupposition and oppressive practices that have held them captive. The jester melts away all those things that are supposedly “written in stone.” In Jesus day, this would unmask the entire economic system for what it is – a system that milks the poor for the benefit of the rich. He or she (because women can be jesters too) subverts the myths and rationalities that everyone takes for granted, but that often are the ways of death, not life. Nowhere does Jesus play the jester more clearly than in our words today as he tackles the law of retaliation. That law, which we know as “an eye for an eye,” taught that the way to respond to anyone who threatens or harms you is through retribution, revenge. It is in the very air we breathe – even today. It drives our world with the war in the Middle East, the detaining of immigrants, the death penalty, and the response to anyone who speaks truth to power. Jesus shares our three scenarios to help melt away those things society tells us are irrefutable and untouchable and invites us to imagine alternatives. He takes the role of the comedian as humor becomes the vehicle to set us free. Jesus challenges the power of domination and violence through antics and lampooning that are worthy of any jester. And the audience would have surely been chuckling or laughing out loud.

In October 2025, Seth Todd aka “Toad” began wearing an inflatable green frog costume in Portland to protests. He was trying to boost morale and add some humor while countering narratives of massive protest violence. It went viral. There was nothing political about the frog; it’s a silly common creature in the rain of Oregon. It occurred to me that the absurdity and hope provided in such an unexpected image mirrored a Savior who would invite followers to turn the other cheek, go naked in a court of law, and carry an oppressor’s bag an extra mile, all in an attempt to overturn injustice and stand up for those with no power or voice in a world which has deemed them inferior. By giving to those in need, revealing an alternative perspective to retaliation and revenge, and turning the tables on oppression, it is our Savior who teaches us how to break the narrative with laughter and dance, with love and grace, with imagination and strategic intervention. May we find a way to welcome such a Savior!