

# Looking Inward

Jim Fleming, Counseling Pastor



Sunday, August 5, 2007

## Turning the Other Cheek

She was sincere and perplexed. Her spouse of some 25 years, due to his own insecurity, had dominated her through threat and abuse. At times, to vary his punches, as if his arm was around God's shoulder, he'd play the religious card, reminding her of the two-steps-behind-the-man role his religious denomination supported. A serious student of her religious instruction, she said she had turned the other cheek many times in her marriage. Her physician had referred her to me to address her severe depression and the deeply-entrenched religious beliefs that seemed to be feeding her internal darkness. She was sincere in believing it was a Godly virtue to, with straightened arms pinned to her side, turn her face so the other cheek could be pounded physically and emotionally by any tormented soul who felt they had the right to do so. But, she was also confused. She wondered how religion could support the unchallenged destruction of others, including herself. It was, in her mind, unloving, unchristian, selfish, and weak to confront the dark cloud of abuse and destruction of God's creation - one's self. This "sincere notion of turning the other cheek" is lived out in many of our lives in more subtle, yet still soul-crippling, ways.

While respectful of her right to read Scripture in her own way, I wondered about her unquestioning, fear-filled, almost idolatrous digestion of her religious teaching. Can you identify with her? Have there been times in your life when you were hurt but didn't flinch because it was "the way it is supposed to be?" "The way it is supposed to be" is the catch phrase here. Regardless of new evidence, of studies, of further understanding of what your own soul has been screaming at you, "a particular way" remains because over time it has won the cultural thumb's up as "the way it is supposed to be."

Christ leaned His shoulder into the chest of His time when he declared, "You've heard it said, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies.' But I say unto you, love your enemies." He paid for challenging His culture's "the way it is supposed to be."

You've turned your other cheek and unflinchingly enabled and empowered your own and others' emotional,

mental, physical, and spiritual dismemberment. Maybe, hopefully, you've cracked the door and let yourself "wonder" whether there is a deeper meaning to "turning the other cheek" that doesn't advocate self destruction.

*Because* I'm a certain gender or race, *because* I never felt loved as a child, *because* my religion says it's so, *because* I'm afraid to stop it, *because* I don't want to face the fallout of not taking it, *because* I don't deserve better, *because* it'll just be worse if I change, *because* I'm simply afraid, I allow my physical and emotional cheek to turn and receive the next blow. This "turning of the cheek" may be *fueled* by fear, by a lack of self-love, by guilt and shame, by brainwashing, by misinformation. God's assignment to Adam and Eve to be good stewards of all creation, including their own "created-in-God's-image" self, is *overturned* by the above "because and fuels."

There is a time to "turn the other cheek" when it communicates tolerance, patience, self-control, even a special love for another. I would say such instances must be carefully considered.

My friend, the woman mentioned at the beginning of this reflection, struggled to discern the difference between turning the other cheek from a position of strength, depth, and love and doing so from a position of fear, entrapment, or self worthlessness. Her family and religious upbringing supported self and social mutilation as an expression of allegiance and respect. *She felt trapped and powerless to care for her own soul.* Her depression became both a call for help and a motivation to think, to wonder, to explore, to spiritually journey.

There are so many ways we can expose ourselves to blows, to neglects, to resignations that numb and deaden us to the core of our soul. There is nothing holy and spiritually enriching about destruction of God's image within us. Nothing! Many a journey connecting to God's presence begins with turning and listening to our insides - to the moans, groans, and questions that have never gone away. Such listening assists us in knowing when to turn and when not to turn.