

Perhaps some of us have seen the movie about Jackie Robinson, who was the first African-American to play major league baseball in the 20th century. The movie depicts the prejudice and hatred Robinson had to endure and the depth of patience, courage, and self-control he displayed in the face of relentless adversity. One scene in the movie is Robinson's interview with Branch Rickey, the general manager, who already knows that Robinson's baseball skills qualify him for the job. But Rickey is looking for something else – he's looking to measure Robinson's character – does Robinson have the character to avoid fighting back – because if he fights back, the conflict will escalate and the focus will be drawn away from playing baseball and winning games.

Rickey asks, "What do you think, Jackie? Do you got guts enough to play the game no matter what happens? They'll shout insults at you. They'll come into you spikes first. They'll throw at your head." "They've been throwing at my head for a long time, Mr. Rickey," Robinson responds.

Rickey fabricates a scenario: "Suppose I'm a player on the eve of an important game. Suppose I collide with you at second base, and when I get up I say, 'You, you dirty black so-and-so.' What do you do?"

"Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?" Robinson asks.

Rickey answers emphatically, "I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back. You've got to do the job with base hits, stolen bases, and fielding ground balls, Jackie. Nothing else. Now, I'm playing you in the World Series, and I'm hotheaded. I want to win the game. So I go into you spikes first. You jab the

ball in my ribs and the umpire says 'out'. All I can see is your black face, that black face right over me. So I haul off and punch you right in the cheek. What do you do?"

Robinson calmly thinks for a moment, then answers, "Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks."

Rickey likes that answer and Robinson receives the contract. He does encounter much of what Rickey described and he does turn the other cheek and becomes a model of courage and humility. Through him, baseball was integrated.

Jesus calls us to a radical love of our neighbor that models his love for us. That radical love often involves turning the other cheek to avoid conflicts that detract from our ministry – our calling to be Christ in the world. It involves forgiveness, rather than retaliation. It involves a transformed way of life – away from what the Jewish Christians in Matthew's community were used to based on their laws and toward the way of Christ. It involves a way of life that is away from what we see in the world today and toward the way of Christ.

The rule of reciprocity, which is rendered "An eye for an eye" and a tooth for a tooth," was prevalent throughout the ancient world. In fact, many of the laws that comprised the Levitical code of the Israelite community were built around this rule of reciprocity. The rule essentially said that whatever damage someone does must be done to him as punishment and/or he must pay the value of the damages caused. This rule was even applicable if harm was done accidentally.; for example a veterinarian who performs surgery on an animal that dies might have to replace the animal.

Yet in Christ's life we repeatedly see examples of turning the

other cheek. He forgives the sins of many and he heals many of ailments that in that time were believed to have originated from sin. Jesus forgives Peter for denying him three times. Jesus teaches his disciples that they must forgive someone 70 x 7 times -- an expression that means all the time, eternally. Jesus doesn't fight back when he is crucified and, in fact, prays "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

If we are to effectively portray the love of Christ to the world, we also are called to live in this generous way. We are called to be slow to anger and quick to forgive. We are called to look for the good in people and not at the bad. We are told to love all people and to pray for them. In fact, praying for our enemies is especially important. Not only may God work to change the heart of your enemy, but God will certainly work through that prayer to change our hearts -- because it is hard to pray for someone while retaining resentment in your heart.

By living generously, as Jesus did, and concentrating on love rather than revenge, we keep ourselves focused on our ministry, which is showing Christ's love in the world, which is bringing others to know that love.

Some of us may remember the school shooting that killed five children in an Amish community about 10 years ago. The Amish community not only forgave the shooter (who also died himself) but went out of their way to support and comfort his family. They showed Christ's love. The mother of the shooter has recently written a book entitled *Forgiven* where she talks about how her life was transformed by the forgiveness and love she was shown. She has felt a call to the ministry of spreading the message of forgiveness wherever she goes. Because the Amish spread Christ's message of forgiveness to her, she spreads it to

hundreds and thousands of other people.

The whole Gospel message is that God loves us so much that rather than punish us for our sins – as we deserve – He paid that penalty Himself so that we could be reconciled to God in Christ. Our Lord forgives.

When we retaliate, we take the focus away from Christ and His love. Yet, when we forgive others and become reconciled to them, we put the focus on Christ's love where it belongs. We spread the Gospel and we transform ourselves and we transform others.

Amen