In the name of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1564, a British ship approached the Americas with 400 African slaves. Over the course of the next few centuries many other ships would do the same. The special thing about this ship was that it was named, “The Jesus,” “Jesus of Lubeck” to be exact. And after the astounding profit from its precious cargo was all divvied up, the ship became known as “The Good Jesus” to the Christian investors who commissioned it.

“The Good Jesus” was enormous-- 700 tons-- and evidently quite impressive. Its masts rose majestically up into the air, its huge white sails blown taut by the wind, its proud stern ripping through the waters. The Good Jesus was a grand symbol of the kind of Christianity that made the slave trade possible. And one absolutely essential ingredient was Holy Scripture. The Slave Traders loved the Apostle Paul because he said: “Slaves, obey your masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ,” and later, “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity. . .” But these Slave Traders did not limit themselves to the Apostle Paul. They also had a soft spot in their hearts for the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel:

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.”

Our elite forefathers interpreted these verses quite literally. They read this text as a command for the weak to be doormats to the strong. They read it as a sign of God’s satisfaction with the status quo. Over the centuries, this text has been written on human bodies in bruised cheeks, swollen lips, blackened eyes, bloodied noses, broken jaws, and far worse. If we had an audio account of this text, it would rise up in the sobs and screams of Jews beaten by Roman soldiers, of slaves beaten by masters, of women and men beaten by their intimate partners, of children abused by parents. We cannot measure the psychological impact of this violence or the damage done to the souls of faithful Christians who bore these blows because they felt the Gospel demanded it.

It’s hard to see how this literal interpretation offers any hope to people who have their ‘backs against the wall.’ But what are the other options? What other stances can we take? What other possibilities does the Christian tradition offer?

Well, the best resources come from people Justo Gonzalez calls the “neglected interpreters,” the poor and marginalized members of the church. These are Christians who have been pressed to the floor by suffering. And as a result, these Christians have insights on the faith that the privileged don’t. So if we want to know what a text means, these folks provide a good place to start.

Along this line, I read one slave narrative recently in which a traveling preacher shares our ‘Gospel of Passivity’ with a group of illiterate slaves. These slaves are gutsy enough to tell the preacher he’s reading the bible wrong—that the Jesus they know would never say anything like that. Well the preacher is stunned that

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1 Ephesians 6:5. Also Colossians 3:22.
2 While this is a common idiom at this point, I’m thinking of the way Howard Thurman uses the term in Jesus and the Disinherited—as indicative of people who are poor and oppressed.
people who cannot read would dare to contradict him, and he insists that he is in fact reading the bible correctly. But the slaves are not convinced; they know in their bones that the preacher is missing something, that there has to be another way to understand the Gospel.

And they are right. There’s actually a second group of interpreters that takes this message about turning the other cheek in a different direction, and they do it by introducing a key element: time.

They listen to all the objections people raise about this text—all the concerns about abuse and violence and they just nod their heads and lean back in their chairs and smile. And then they say, “You know what your problem is? . . . Your problem is that you put too much stake in this world—in the here and now. This text can never be understood in the confines of ordinary human time. It can only be understood with an eye on eternity. So, yes, it might seem like Jesus is asking you to be a doormat or a sacrificial lamb for the time being, but it’s just for a moment—for a blink of the eye. If you really want to understand what Jesus is saying, widen your focus beyond the next millisecond and remember that this world is passing away.” In other words, their answer is heaven. Simply focus on heaven and trust that all the sorrows we face here will be healed there.

Martin Luther King grew up listening to men and women who held this view. This was the dominant view in the Black Church during his childhood when lynching was the law of the land. In the face of this horror, these men and women turned their eyes to Zion and taught others to do the same. And with an eye on eternity they were able to spoon out hope to people in despair. More than that, they were able to save lives. They taught young African American men like Martin how to avoid conflict, and sometimes avoiding a conflict is the only way to survive it. So, there is wisdom in this view—life-saving wisdom.

And yet the Powers that Be rely on this very thing—on our tendency to avoid conflict—to prioritize survival and go with the flow. But are there times when God wants more for us than mere survival? Are there occasions when God might want us to enter a conflict rather than run from it? Are there times when the Holy Spirit might steer us into a mess, so that we can get down in it and radiate God’s grace there? Martin Luther King’s life would suggest the answer to these questions is yes, and with him in mind, I want to offer a third interpretation of this message about turning the other cheek: Protest.

Some scholars read these directives from Jesus as invitations to protest. Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” Well, what would happen if someone offered the other cheek in protest—As an act of defiance? Well, two things would happen:

First, the perpetrator would be stunned by the victim’s nerve—the sheer audacity of standing up. In that moment it’s as if the victim is holding up a mirror to the perpetrator, saying: ‘Look at yourself. Look at what you just did. Look at who you are.’

Secondly, by turning the other cheek, the disgusting pattern of the strong bulldozing the weak is interrupted just for a moment. It becomes a Tiananmen Square moment—an instant when the person who was imagined as weak takes a stand. For a brief instant the victim and the perpetrator are equals. Even if the perpetrator decides to strike a second time or become even more violent, the power of this moment of

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3 Evelyn Underhill.
4 One such scholar is Walter Wink, who wrote Jesus and Nonviolence.
5 Edward Said even narrates this moment beautifully.
equality will not be lost on anyone—not the victim, not the perpetrator, nor any bystanders. Change becomes possible.

But let’s consider another example. Jesus says, ‘from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt.’ How can this be protest? Well, a poor person in first century Palestine would often only have two pieces of clothing—an outer garment called the ‘coat’ and an undergarment called the ‘shirt.’ The poor were saddled with so much debt that frequently the only thing they could offer as collateral was their coat. If a lender came demanding payment and the debtor wasn’t able to cough up enough money, the lender would take his coat and leave him in his underwear. If this debtor follows Jesus and hands over his undergarment he’d be stark naked—and that’s exactly the point! He’d stun the lender by holding up a mirror to his actions.

To make matters worse, in Jewish culture it was not only shameful to be naked, it was especially shameful to cause someone else’s nakedness- to strip another human being of their dignity. Jesus is being a bit of a trickster here, and he’s encouraging his followers to do likewise in order to expose the brutality of the system.

But Jesus’ followers weren’t the only ones listening to his message that day. I have a feeling some Roman soldiers overheard it, too. It’s no accident that Jesus later has his own cheek slapped. It’s no accident that his coat is stripped or that men cast lots for his clothing. It’s certainly no accident that this particular agitator is hanged and left naked on a cross. These violent acts can be traced right back to this sermon about turning the other cheek, because the message was really about turning the tables on the oppressor. There’s nothing that outrages the Powers that Be more than being exposed for what they are.

And that’s why Martin Luther King’s work is so compelling. He was able to expose the brutality of American racism. He held up a mirror to our nation and the sight of our violence and hatred was so awful that some people—many people decided to change. He raised the floor, elevating the standard of behavior that could reasonably be considered ‘Christian.’

Of course, there was some pushback. There were people who saw their reflections and tried to break the mirror. They tried to slam it down and slam down the man who held it up by jailing him, bombing his house, threatening his wife and children, plotting his murder. They didn’t realize that Martin Luther King was clothed in the power of the Holy Spirit. They didn’t realize that the Living Christ was with Martin, and that meant he had Power even the jaws of death could not crush. I dare to believe the same is true for us.

This text is here to remind us that even when we seem to be at our weakest we have a choice. We don’t have to stand powerless before the beast or throw in the towel and focus on heaven. Clothed in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can take a stand. We can embrace the Christian legacy of protest by standing up for the weak, the poor and the outsider. We can practice the kind of Christianity that protects people whose backs are pushed against the wall. Only then will the ‘Good Ship Jesus’ really become a thing of the past.

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May God grant us the courage to turn the other cheek when the time comes. Amen.