

Proverbs 24:23-29
Matthew 5:38-42

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MILE TWO

“... and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” Matthew 5:41-42

Twenty five hundred years ago the ancient Persians had a problem. How to communicate quickly and efficiently across an empire with no natural sea routes. A vast land mass that stretched from the Indus river in the east, at the gateway to India, to Macedonia in the west, just north of Greece. It was equivalent to the distance from the southern tip of Newfoundland to San Francisco Bay, and from Houston to the Canadian border. So the Persians developed the first truly international postal system through a network of riders and staging posts that made the Pony Express look like a trip to the Devon post office. Stages of riders could cover as much as two hundred miles each day. Along the route was provided food and rest places for horse and rider. If anything was lacking, by imperial command any person could be conscripted, impressed into service to make sure the mail got through.

When, five centuries later the Romans adopted the Persian mail system, the word used for such compulsion gave rise to the word in our text for compulsion, the forcing of someone into temporary service. But Roman used it of any type of conscription, whereby, by law a soldier could force a passer-by to carry his equipment for a distance of one *milion*, from which we derive “mile.” Soldiers often abused the law, making local conscripts go two miles or more, to the deep resentment of occupied peoples.

When a conscript is coerced by the authority of a soldier to carry a load one mile, the soldier wields great power, not just the soldier's power but all the force of imperial power that stands behind it. The conscript is powerless. But when the conscript insists on carrying the load not one mile but two, that voluntary act makes imperial power effectively powerless. As Eduard Schweizer puts it, “When the victim determines how far he will go, he has control, he is no longer subjugated, he is superior.” This teaching about going the second mile is one of a series in the sermon on the mount in which Jesus reverses, with staggering implications, commonly held assumptions about the conduct that's acceptable among communities of faith. For instance, “You have heard that it was said [in the Old Testament law], ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ But now I tell you, do not resist someone who does you wrong. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, offer to him the left cheek, also” (Matthew 5:38-39). Under Jewish law, a blow with the back of the hand, and thus to the right cheek, was considered especially

degrading, and a twofold punishment or retribution. Offering the left cheek to the open hand makes for a threefold slight. In a statement that implicitly and powerfully speaks from the heart of Jesus, Schweizer goes on:

Jesus is concerned with the fragile and perpetually vulnerable social bond, which so often through the use of force or even mere legal coercion erupts into bitterness, counterforce, and thence into catastrophe. Therefore one must never under any circumstances, adopt the style of one's opponents, not even to gain a worthwhile end.

Let's concede that we have a way to go to reach that ethical Everest. As a step on the way, let's challenge ourselves to a truly second-mile giving whose self-sacrifice of say, time and energy, can build relationships that widen in influence like rings on a pond.

This past Monday I had a call from Carol, an older friend up the hill in my neighborhood. We stop and chat periodically when our paths converge, me huffing up the hill with my lab, Molly, in tow. She perhaps driving by, or bringing in the trash containers, or troweling in her flower beds. Carol lost her husband of many years about a year ago, and as she had a birthday last Saturday, perhaps to ease the anniversary of Gus's death, her friends decided to have a party for her at her home.

On Saturday morning Carol went to the refrigerator for some cold water, and the water was warm. Everything in there was warm. "I panicked," she said, with the thought of all she needed to refrigerate that day. So she picked up our neighborhood directory, your street may likely have one, listing all the plumbers, dry cleaners, electricians that folks on the street like to recommend. She called the first name on the list and got an answering machine. No point leaving a message on a Saturday, she thought, they won't get it till Monday. She went to the next name, Erminio Gambone, whom Jane and I had recommended. He's done work at the house and at the church. I was particularly impressed that when he could not fix a job, he called PECO, and then dropped by a couple of days later to make sure they'd taken care of us. Carol knew none of these details, she just called Erminio. He answered the phone; she explained the problem, and he asked her if she could move the refrigerator away from the wall so he could ascertain if it was a refrigerator or a power problem. "I'm an old lady living alone, I can't move that thing," said Carol.

"I'll be there in half an hour," he said.

Sure enough, half an hour later he was at Carol's house. The refrigerator had indeed gasped its last. She explained about the party. "How can I help?" he asked.

At this, Carol must have sent up a prayer. "Could you buy me a new refrigerator?"

"I can do that," he said. And he suggested that something comparable would be perhaps a thousand dollars. But first she needed to move all the food that she needed to refrigerate. Having the key to the home of her neighbor's who were away, the good Samaritan electrician helped her back and forth carrying loads of food to the neighbors. Then she went to get him a thousand in cash, and off he went.

An hour or so passed, and the phone rang. "I went to Circuit City," Erminio said, but they didn't have what you want. So I'm here at Lowe's. They have a nice white one."

“Any other colors?” she asked, looking at her black stove top and appliances.

“They have the same model in black.”

“That’s perfect,” said Carol.

“I need to get my son,” said Erminio, and I’ll be there within the hour.”

An hour later, with the doors taken off to the kitchen, the refrigerator installed, the shelves in, the food ferried back in rounds from the neighbors, and the fridge purring like a cat in Nirvana, they stood in the kitchen, Carol on the verge of tears with gratitude and relief.

“Do you know of Padre Pio?” Carol asked.

Padre Pio, I learned, was an Italian Catholic Capuchin friar from Italy, whose ministry gained thousands of supporters. He lived for fifty years with the stigmata, the spontaneous wounds in the hands. He was canonized a Saint in 1997, and a shrine to his memory in Barto, Pennsylvania, draws many people.

“Of course I know him,” said Erminio.

“I go to Barto, now and then,” said Carol, saying that she planned another trip to offer her gratitude for the miraculous day.

“I can offer one better than that,” said Erminio. “I lead a trip to his birthplace in Pietrelcina, southern Italy, every year. You should come with us.”

Carol, with a heart full of gratitude, responded immediately that she would.

An hour later, Carol came down from her shower to a house full of people already there for her birthday party. And she lost no time telling her day’s story.

“You gave a complete stranger \$1,000 in cash,” her friends said, astonished.

“We’ll, the Reverend put him on the list,” she said. “Of course I trusted him.”

“And you know what else,” Carol said, winding. “Gus found a way to send me a birthday present of a new refrigerator.” Amen.