Seventh Sunday of the Year, A

Old St. Pat’s, 2023

I am consistently astounded

not just at what scientists discover, but also how

they sometimes accidentally stumble onto truths big and small.

One of the most famous chance finds

was Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin:

Halfway through an experiment with bacteria

he left his lab and went on vacation for two weeks.

Alternately described as messy, unfastidious or just a slob

he left a stack of dirty dishes smeared with bacteria.

When he returned he found that bacteria had grown all over

except where a certain mold had formed.

According to one wag, that episode led to two things:

first, the discovery of the wonder drug penicillin,

and second, his wife hiring a maid.

While the discovery of penicillin

Doesn’t have much to do with today’s readings

Another somewhat obscure archeological discovery might.

It is a well-established fact

that about 90% of the world’s population is right-handed.

Some scientists tried to figure out why that was so

and how long trait has existed in our species.

One of the ways they did this

was by looking at teeth.

Sounds odd or maybe simply smart!

Over 100,000 years ago, maybe earlier

our ancestors started processing animal skins.

Not surprisingly, this seemed to coincide

with the beginning of the last ice-age.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Those of us who live through Chicago winters

understand the need for a warm coat.

And what does this have to do with teeth?

Well, if you didn’t have a hide stretcher,

and our ancient ancestors didn’t,

the easiest way for an individual to process a hide

was to hold it in your teeth,

stretch it out with one hand,

while the other handheld a stone tool for scraping.

Clever archaeologists[[2]](#endnote-2) have found consistent evidence

of dental scratches where the owner

accidently scrapped their teeth with these stone tools.

The marks predominantly went from

he upper left to the lower right side

demonstrating that most early humans

were also right-handed.

Now I know this must be absolutely fascinating for you

but there is a theological point to be made

and – with apologies to all dentists and hygienists –

it’s not about dental hygiene.

Walter Wink (d. 2012) was a celebrated Methodist biblical scholar.

In his book *My Struggle to Be Human,*

this of nonviolent resistance has a chapter subtitled:

turning the right cheek.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In it he recalls a class discussion on today’s gospel passage

inviting students to role play the text: two volunteered.

They faced off, deciding who would be the hitter

and who would be the hittee.

Then Wink asked the hitter,

“How will you strike your opponent?”

The student, part of the 90% right-handers club,

made a fist with his right hand and faked a blow.

Students objected, saying that the text doesn’t say

right fist but right cheek.

To strike someone on the right check would require

a left-handed fist.

The only way that a right-handed person

could strike the right cheek

was with the back of the right hand.

Wink then deduces that what Jesus is describing

is not a fistfight, but an insult

intended not to injure but to humiliate.

A backhanded slap was the normal way

of admonishing inferiors not injuring one’s equal.

Wink further surmised that Jesus audience was not composed

of hitters but hittees – an audience of victims.

These are the ones who suffered dehumanizing treatment

because of their status or gender, age or race.

But if that is so, why does Jesus counsel the already humiliated

to turn the other cheek?

Wink concludes: because it is an act of defiance!

that robs the oppressor the power to humiliate.

If you turn the other cheek you can’t get backhanded again:

your nose is in the way.

If the oppressor hits you with his fist

he makes you his equal

implicitly acknowledging that

he now stands toe to toe with a peer.

Wink concludes, turning the other cheek

was not an act of cowardice or passivity

but an act of defiance.

This past week, millions of USonians celebrated Valentine’s Day.

Expenditures on the flowers, candy, dinners and gifts

totaled an estimated 26 Billion dollars:

one wonders what that amount would do

to the recovery efforts in Turkey and Syria these days.

Besides resistance to the opulence sometimes on display

in Valentine gifting like

The $363,000 Chopard de Rigo sunglasses

The $640,000 Montblanc pen

Or the 2.1-million-dollar Chopard watch.[[4]](#endnote-4)

there is a growing resistance by some

to the very concept of Valentine’s

with its emphasis on amorous affection for significant others.

So a few years back, there emerged Galentine’s Day

invented by a character on the sitcom Parks & Recreation

celebrating friendship between women on February 13th.

Soon to follow was the more inclusive Palentine’s Day

not limited to women but a celebration of any friendship

Also occurring on the 13th of February.

Words like Palentine and Galentine are what linguists call:

portMANteaus – a new word invented by combining two others like

brunch = breakfast and lunch

motel = motor and hotel

Brexit = Britain and exit.

One wonders whether in today’s readings

We are invited to live into some new portmanteau reality

like be frenemies to each other

as in friendly enemies

or authentic brangers to each other

as in brothers to strangers

or even follaborators, that is

foes who collaborate.

Of course, this is not just about linguistic niceties,

but about learning to encounter each other

even to differ with each other

without the metaphorical backhand and insult.

Our public and private discourse these days

Easily degenerates into belittlement,

disparagement and ridicule

from heckling leaders

in the hallowed halls of government

to the racial or sexist or agist slurs

too easily welling up in our hearts

then spilling out on our tongues

planting fresh seeds of prejudice in the young and innocent.

It is admittedly difficult, but the gospels these weeks

challenge us to acquire an embodied vocabulary

for disagreement without diminishment

for opposition without oppression

even for rivalry without vilification.

While my very private father never spoke of this event

almost 30 years ago I learned something about

follaborators, brangers and frenemies through his eyes.

The celebration of my parent’s 50th wedding anniversary

included a 10-day trip for the three of us to Hawaii.

On the last day of that trip we visited pearl harbor.

On the launch out to the Arizona memorial

Dad, who had served in the Navy during World War II,

grew more and more agitated.

When I inquired what was bothering him

he could only say, “Why are all of them here.”

The “them” were the throngs of Japanese tourists

many my father’s age, some of whom I imagined

he had fought against in the Pacific.

There’s not much to the Arizona memorial:

a small platform perched on the roof of a tomb,

a few places to peer through the water,

to the turrets of the ship below,

and a surprisingly small inner sanctum,

where the names of those who rest in the waters below

are inscribed upon the wall.

Separating that wall from a row of benches

were a few waist-high crowd control poles

linked to each other by red velvet ropes.

As my parents and I sat in the front row

staring at the wall of names through a steady drizzle

an unexpected ritual unfolded

as one elderly Japanese woman stepped forward

took the flowered lei from around her neck

and placed it over one of the poles;

another woman followed, then another, and another.

Within minutes the poles and connected ropes

were weighed down in an explosion of orchids.

Dad was crying, then whispered something to my mother

who removed the lei she was wearing.

He then stood up and stepped into the flow of Asian women

whom he towered over as he moved forward

placing the delicate flowers on this makeshift shrine.

As he returned to his seat, head bowed,

I was aware that these Japanese women, this ancient enemy

had entered into his holy of holies and taught him reverence,

offering glimpses of reconciliation in their symbolic dance.

But the teaching was not quite over

for in a final ritual inversion

when the flower procession had apparently come to an end

one elderly Japanese man stood

walked deliberately toward the same post Dad had approached

removed the ring of orchids from around his neck

placing them carefully on top of those my mother had worn.

He then turned, facing my father seated before him,

and quietly bowed to the honored gentleman who gave me life

before returning to his seat.

Music: to you who bow

The rabbi was once asked by his students

Why is it that in ages past

God appeared to so many women and men

But in this age, God seems to appear to no one.

The rabbi’s reply: because in this age

no one seems capable of bowing low enough.

Bowing low is difficult, so often implying humiliation.

But Jesus reminds us that such can actually be

an act of defiance in the face of a boastful world

One which St. Paul takes on today, admonishing

that we do not boast about

what superior party, class or race we imagine belonging to

because we first belong to each other

whether frenemies, brangers, or follaborators …

And, in turn, we all belong to Christ.

We pray that in our speaking and acting

we might be willing to humble ourselves as Jesus did

so that we might put an end

to all literal and metaphorical backhanding

and the dignity of every child of God

might thus be enhanced

through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://hyperallergic.com/681497/scientists-have-found-the-earliest-evidence-of-leather-clothes/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://science.discoveryplace.org/stay-at-home-science/was-early-man-right-handed-archeologists-think-so> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Wink, *My Struggle to become Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1017), pp. 65ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.catawiki.com/en/stories/5067-top-5-most-expensive-valentine-s-day-gifts [↑](#endnote-ref-4)