

## It's a Long Road

When did you first hear the phrase, "go the extra mile?"

To be honest, for me, and I think probably most people I know, it just *is*. The phrase has been drilled into us from time immemorial. The words have rested in our minds and become part of the fabric of our social awareness. Go the extra mile. Work harder. Persevere. Go above and beyond in all that you do. It is the war cry of the Puritan work ethic and it originated from, "go the second mile also."

This is not what Jesus intended. We could study how the phrase wound up so warped from the original meaning for months on end – that's not what we are here to do. I am more interested in diving back into the Sermon on the Mount, where the phrase comes from, listening to what Jesus was saying and why, to see how this phrase might get new meaning for us today.

So, let's talk about the original context.

Most of Jesus' most famous teachings come from the Sermon on the Mount. To read the whole sermon in its entirety is to take a brisk walk through the most profound spiritual teachings in human history. "Don't build your house on foundations of sand." "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth..." "No one can serve two masters..." The list goes on and on, including the Golden Rule (which we will talk about next week) and the Lord's Prayer. All of it is here in one sermon. There is so much wisdom that we must take them one at a time, and turn them over as individuals, but they are all part of one, bigger point.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus argues that the Kingdom of Heaven is not some distant ideal or promise. The kingdom is here, right here and right now. We can be there now. All it takes is living with self-giving love, no more, no less.

And when Jesus gets to this place, fairly early in the sermon, he is talking about not fighting back, even when we are struck or put down, when we are sued, or when figures of authority abuse us. He brings up a thorny issue that was common at the time. Roman soldiers throughout the empire, were apparently allowed to conscript non-citizens of conquered lands into service – including carrying their packs while marching.

Imagine for a moment working fields, or tending to a flock, or trying to build a home, and marching soldiers pass through your town. One calls you over and tosses their backpack at you. There really is nothing you can do. While some scholars in the modern era have made Jesus out to be a rebel who was raising a revolt against Rome, these words are pretty clear that Jesus was a passivist who called for his followers to go a different way. When faced with this, Jesus says to not only do what the soldiers ask, but take it even further.

The act would have been radical, throwing into the faces of the soldiers that one was stronger than them, shaming them even. It is also, an example of the heart of the lesson in the Sermon on the Mount. That to follow Jesus is to live with self-giving love and compassion. Not only would a follower not fight back, but would turn (transform, really) an act of abuse into an act of empathy.

So, what do we do with this?

It is a relatively rare occurrence that any American – living as we are in the so-called *Pax Americana* – would experience the sort of martial abuse that was common for first century Jews. That said, I cannot help but see that Jesus talks about one person making another carry their baggage.

How many of us have been in a relationship where we have had to carry someone else's baggage? The emotional toll of being made responsible for someone else's feelings is terrible. And increasingly, I am seeing this spilling over into our public discourse. It may be the slow burn of political discord coming to a boil. It may be the collective pressure of decades of social decline in rural America and the decline of once powerful industries. It is likely a cocktail of social pressures that are far too complicated to deal with fully while also facing a health crisis and an economic crisis. With all this bubbling to the surface I tend to see deep, true sadness lurking just under the surface of peoples' smiles.

So many are carrying around with them everyday trauma. The weight of the emotional baggage is isolating and self-alienating. It is soul crushing. It is no wonder then, that so much vitriol is spewing in social discourse. It is a sign of hurt.

Coming back to Jesus' words for us today, what are we to do when another forces us to walk a mile holding their baggage?

Well, for starters we cannot make it ours. We cannot become responsible for the feelings of another. We can, however, encounter them with the sort of empathy and compassion that makes the Kingdom of Heaven real. There is another "walking" phrase – or nugget of wisdom – that may help us here. Back in 1895 Mary T. Lathrap wrote the poem "Judge Softly." It is the origin of the phrase, "walk a mile in someone else's shoes."

In the poem Mary calls us to judge softly those we meet, for there are hurts there we cannot see. To walk a mile in someone else's shoes (moccasins in the original poem) we put ourselves in a new place. We exchange the life we own and place on our shoulders the weight of someone else's experience. Jesus calls for us to walk the second mile, and some may say it is an act of rebellion, but every once in a while I catch a glimpse of something holy about taking longer than has been asked a weight, or a problem, I did not ask for. To walk the second mile is to live as grace for someone who needs it. It is to try and see them with compassion and empathy.

If we simply walk with others who we do not understand, who foist upon us their pain (by whatever name it reaches us) then we may make in each encounter space for the healing grace of God to enter in. This is the kingdom of heaven.