

Fight, or Flight, or...

Rev. John Allen

Conventional wisdom tells us that we have two options when we are under threat. Fight or flight.

You can curl up, cower, or run away.

Or you can fight back.

These two instincts are actually embedded in the deepest part of our brain stem, a holdover from our reptilian ancestors.

And no matter how much we evolve, and develop new ways to consider and reason, richer imagination, and more complicated emotional lives, it is striking how much we still default to these choices. Fight. Or Flight.

Think about a recent situation where you felt uncomfortable or challenged. What was your response?

Did your hair stand up and your blood boil?

Did you get away as quickly as you could?

Think about the relationships in your life that seem to be ever defined by conflict. Are you fighting? Have you cut yourself off completely in self protection?

And I don't think I need to tell you that in the throws of our immense national anxiety right now, most of us react to political or moral opposition with either dramatically righteous anger, or numb, resigned, withdrawal.

Are you commenting in all caps? Are you unfriending?

The problems with this twin reactions are clear:

When we fight, conflict just gets bigger and bigger.

When we flee, it festers, and unresolved, and unacknowledged, it grows worse, and worse.

We cannot really solve problems by fighting,

And we cannot really solve problems by running away.

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During Holy Week, which begins today with Palm Sunday, we will remember the most dramatic moments of threat and conflict in Jesus' life.

In the days that follow we will remember his Last Supper with the disciples, his prayer in the garden of gethsemane, his arrest, his trial, and his execution on the cross.

And we will see how his disciples respond. Most of them flee. At least one of them fights back.

But for his part, Jesus finds another way.

He certainly does not fight, but his behavior in this final week of his life is anything but passive.

Today's story is a perfect example, Jesus is leading a revolution that strives to confront the evil of his time. He is seeking to turn the tables that have abused the poor and kept the oppressed captive.

He comes to proclaim freedom to the captive, and good news to the poor.

And yet unlike the other revolutionaries of his time, and most of history, his grand entrance into the capital city is not a show of force. There is not a weapon to be found.

Instead, his followers carry palm leaves.

And he rides on a humble donkey.

He is not passive, he is not running away, but he also will not fight.

Even with the crowd at his back, violence is never on the table.

This is one of the most inspiring and admirable things about Jesus.

Even if the conflict made him anxious. Even when the fear twisted his stomach into knots. Even when he was facing down the most powerful empire the world had ever known.

He never lost his imagination. He never lost his ability to see beyond the moment. He never slipped into fight or flight.

Shaine Claiborne is a christian author from Philadelphia, in his book "A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals" he describes the work of making peace this way:

"Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free."

When Jesus and his crowd of followers were approaching Jerusalem, the tension hung thick in the air. Jesus had been out in the countryside of several years with a growing following, they were calling him the Son of God, and their Savior. And Jesus, he was teaching people that the old world was about to pass away, and God was about to do something new, turn the world upside down.

And now they were walking toward the seat of power. Into the city where the religious, political, and military elites of the area all sat.

It could have gone any one of a thousand bad ways.

But instead, Jesus turned it into a parade, a celebration in the street. A move that at once showed the power of his movement, but also showed its beauty.

A party in the street. That showed a new way of being in the world, in a way that invited the powerful to lay down their swords, grab a palm branch, and join the fun.

So as we gather here on Thursday night, to hear the stories of Jesus final days, pay attention to how he responded in each moment of conflict and tension, when his very life was on the line.

He never backs down. But he is never violent. Not in his action. Not even in his words. He remains firm in his beliefs, and never loses himself in the conflict.

And I want you to also think about that person, or those people, or that thing in your life or in the world that you feel most oppressed by,

that thing that to you represents the presence of evil or wrong in our world.

That's who Jesus was talking about when he said, "pray for your enemies and bless those who persecute you." And what he is showing us now is God's hope for the world, that each of us would commit our lives to a revolution of love that is big enough to set us, and them, free.

To imagine a way to transform the world without destroying people.

A few nights ago, I heard the District Attorney of Suffolk County Rachael Rollins speak. She gets this.

She said: "When my office goes to Court we represent the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts vs. whoever the defendant is." Then she said, "I always remind our attorneys that the defendant is still a part of the

commonwealth we represent. Just because they are charged with a crime, doesn't mean we don't stand for them too."

Here's our challenge as followers of this Jesus.

Can you work to change the world, without forgetting that your enemies are a part of the world you seek to change?

Can you find a way to step forward, and stand up for yourself and for what you believe in where you have shrunk away?

Can you stand in that moment where your head is screaming, fight, or flee.

And let your heart find another way?

