

Respond, Don't React

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Most of us are so predictable. We have a few thought patterns that we like that we keep using over and over again. Regardless of the situation or issue, we revert back to one of these patterns. We may even have reached the point that others can already guess what we are going to say or do before it actually happens. To any given trigger, we have a given reaction. There are no longer any surprises to us.

Today's Gospel from *Matthew* has some very challenging teachings from Jesus. What makes his teachings so challenging, though, is not necessarily the content in itself, but the fact that the content breaks so sharply with our usual thought patterns. In fact, Jesus goes in the opposite direction. In this passage, he references what seems to be common sense: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Most people think this way, as individuals and as a society: 'If you hurt me, I will hurt you. If you take someone's life, we will take yours.' Yet, Jesus says, 'but I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.' The point is not to become a doormat or let others take advantage of us, but to shake us out of our same few predictable thought patterns. It breaks us out of our reactionary mindset.

Jesus goes on to do this with a few other examples: if someone strikes you on the cheek, turn and offer them the other as well; if someone asks for your tunic, give them your cloak as well; if someone presses you to go one mile with them, go two. In each instance, we think we know what he's going to say, but then he surprises us. The author of *Leviticus* gives us two more: do not take revenge and do not hold a grudge. Again,

all of this shakes us out of our same few thought patterns and makes us pause before we jump into our usually reactions.

In my opinion, religion is at its best when it reminds its followers that they can break their ingrained thought patterns. We are not machines or robots; we are human beings. We don't have to react to everything mindlessly. A reaction is too dependent on being triggered by someone or something. It is too predictable and allows others to dictate our mood, outlook, and even our life. A response is much healthier and wholesome. It is not based on others getting to us, but on our own discernment of what we should do. The goal of religion should be to form responsive people, not reactionary people. Responsive people are free; reactionary people are not.

The season of Lent is now upon us. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. During Lent, we often talk about breaking our sins. Maybe this Lent, we can focus instead on breaking our thought patterns. Maybe we can find ways to surprise ourselves and others by responding to issues, circumstances, and situations in new and different ways.

Jesus wants to break us out of our predictable thought patterns so that we may be truly free to respond to life instead of react to life.

Have I become too predictable in my reactions to life?

Let us pray that we may be responsive people; that we may be able to pause before reacting, move in the opposite direction if necessary, and yes, reach the point where we can do the unthinkable: love and pray for our enemies.