

“But I Say to You...” 2-19-17

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-17

Matthew 5:38-48

I rediscover daily how conflicted my heart can be. The current anger in our political culture catches me in poignant reaction. Revenge movies can really pull me in with their plot. A main character is highly vulnerable and wronged intentionally by a person with more power and resources. Anger takes hold. It feels justified. I discover myself aligning with the victim in an assault of fantasied revenge. When justice against the perpetrator is accomplished my being cries “Yes!”

The desire for retributive justice runs through the Psalms. David cries, “Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire to hurt me...They gave me poison for food...Let their table be a trap for them...Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see...Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them...Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living... (Psalm 70:2; 69:21-27). Try using Google and type in “Revenge Ideas”. There are websites available to assist you in getting even with someone who wronged you.

The problem is that my feeling and desire for justice get corrupted by my fallen nature. No wonder James observes that human “anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (James 1-21). Paul warns that selfish anger can destroy a community as he exhorts the Galatians, “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal.5:15). Words of wisdom to an angry America.

No wonder I like a Jason Bourne movie, a good Quentin Tarantino movie, and others like them. One of the most popular film franchises is “The Avengers”. Some psychologists believe our revenge fantasies satisfied by these revenge films serve as buffers against the negative feelings we associate with victimization. It is vicarious therapy. However, it is short-lived, like a brief sugar high. Afterward dissatisfaction frequently sets in (Homiletics, J-F, 2017, p.63).

Herman Melville in his great novel, “Moby Dick”, reveals what the spirit of revenge can do to the human heart. Captain Ahab fixates retaliation on the whale who takes his limb. “To the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee”. Purposely re-provoking the great white whale his revenge costs him and his crew their lives. Centuries before Confucius observed, “If you devote your life to seeking revenge, dig two graves” (Homiletics, p.67).

Here is where Jesus’ words clip the wings of my fantasied revenge. “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer’...You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’”.

Jesus challenges our lack of moral and spiritual vision. Commentator Dale Brunner invites us to notice how front and center the other person is in Jesus ‘social commands’. By our resistance to an act of an

evil person or an effort to embrace an enemy who has defiled us, is Jesus raising the possibility of a possible redemption for the other person by keeping the relationship open? (Brunner, Matthew, vol.1, p.246).

At staff meeting last Tuesday Kristi Corbin shared the powerful image of the protestors at Standing Rock holding up their shields for protection from riot police attempting to remove them from the land. Their shields were mirrors. Those who were pummeling them with weapons could see themselves and their actions. It had effect (Online Article, Carolina Miranda). I am also reminded of the television film, 'Amish Grace', taken from the book of the same name. It told the story of the Amish' quick willingness to bring forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children in that Pennsylvania Amish school in 2010. In both cases the relationship is kept open for possibilities of change.

Let's take note that the Old Testament Law was a progressive step from the previous form of justice that allowed even a slight injury to someone to be avenged by maiming or killing all the persons in the offending party's family. The eye for an eye commandment made two contributions. One, it checked revenge and second, taught justice. The punishment would fit the crime. This still works for governments within their justice system. A judge still seeks a sentence so that the punishment will fit the crime.

Jesus is calling us into a new narrative. The strongest witness of the early Christians was not in striking back at those who persecuted them. It was when they showed love to their enemies. How? In times of plague, when the Romans were deserting their cities leaving behind sick friends and family members, it was Christians who stayed back to care for those who were sick at their own risk. They cared for abandoned children and provided them a life and family. On we could go with examples of how they followed Jesus in non-retaliatory acts and loving their enemies.

Those of you who follow "The Lord of the Rings" remember the lamentation of Frodo over his Uncle Bilbo's refusal to kill the enemy Gollum, a miserable, murderous thief, when he had the chance. Gandalf replies to Frodo, "It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand...Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment" (Homiletics, Jan.-Feb., Rev. Hunter, p.66).

Jesus calls us to be creative in response to injustices done to us, inviting us to think about who God is and how by implication we might treat others. We are led to ask, "How does God's character and nature lead me to interact with the world?" Theology and ethics work together. Divorce them and we get ourselves in trouble and dishonor the character of Jesus. Our politics, Republican or Democrat, need to address stewardship issues of clean water and the environment, health care for the poor, fair taxation and wage policies, protecting people from violence, respect and care for the immigrant, and fair treatment and rehabilitation of legal offenders. We can debate the means, but the ethics of Jesus remain to be lived out, the focus always on the good of the other.

Jesus is challenging our proclivity to depersonalize the other person. If I call you my enemy I can justify my legitimacy to injure you. Racism and oppression in any form is about delegitimizing another. Are we

in danger of doing that to Muslims so that war on them would be justified?

President Abraham Lincoln, reflecting on the war between the Union and the Confederacy, took to theology in his second inaugural address. He said, "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered...The Almighty has his own purposes" (Homiletics, p.67).

Jesus' social commands lead us into the purposes of God, challenging us to embrace God's character and behavior. Being open to another, no matter their actions against us, is premised on Jesus' invitation "that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"

The Belhar Confession, which is being studied Sunday mornings, frames it this way: "Our call is to resist the temptation (of showing partiality and separation) and to begin to move out beyond our normal comfort zones to engage and embrace those with whom we are not so comfortable, joining hands with them to work for peace and reconciliation wherever we find ourselves" (30 Days with the Belhar, p.19).

It is Jesus who gives us the moral and spiritual vision to cross the bridges that separate us and recognize one another as members of the same human family and to pay attention to one another. Amidst the polarities of race and religion, class, money and power, Jesus is calling us to "carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of disappointment" (MLK, Letter from Birmingham Jail). We need to ask God how we can lift up our relationships, as well as our national policies, "from the quicksand of racial injustice (or any kind injustice) to the solid rock of human dignity" (Letter, MLK).

Jesus tells us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect". The reason we are to possess and choose an attitude of unconquerable benevolence to all is because this is who God is and we are sons and daughters of God. We do what God does. Perfect comes from the Greek word 'teleios'. It is a reality that we live into and has nothing to do with an abstract, philosophical, metaphysical perfection. It refers to an end, a goal, a purpose for which we are created. We are perfect if we realize the purpose for which God has called us, illustrated by Jesus in an attitude of non-retaliation, non-violence, and reaching out to our enemy, whoever we define that person or group of people to be. He is leading us to an inclusive embrace rather than exclusion and fear of the other. I believe that we need to hear Jesus' invitation afresh across America today (Barclay, "Matthew", vol.1, p.176-7).

God's love never ceases to care for people, no matter what is done to hurt or offend that love. The Cross is the supreme example of that, a suffering love into which Jesus calls us. Such love seeks to create possibilities of reconciliation and redemption on behalf of other people in our lives.

So I am back to my conflicted self and those revenge fantasies. I must acknowledge those real feelings and be reminded that love is a matter of the will. I can choose to nurture the response of love Jesus is calling me into or a vengeful hate calling me away from Jesus' love. "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you". What will we say to Jesus?

