

*“An Eye for an Eye”*

*Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48*

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“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Most of us know the saying. Perhaps most of us also know its source, context and meaning. But three recent killings—Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, Chad Oulson by retired police officer Curtis Reeves, and Jordan Davis by business man Michael Dunn—make it clear that there is a cultural shift that seeks to not only neutralize Jesus’ teaching but the Hebrew scriptures on which it is based.

The defense for these murders is not retaliation for murder. They are not honor killings. They are not mob hits or a response to a brandished weapon. Indeed, all the victims were unarmed. All three deaths are related to Florida’s version of the “stand your ground” law, which states that a person who is attacked has no duty to retreat.

So what I will do in this message is reflect on Jesus’ teaching and the law on which it is based, reflect briefly on the cultural shifts that make the Christian message ever-more counter-cultural, and suggest way we might consider these matters as a Christian community.

*“You have heard that it was said ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”* This law predates the Old Testament, appearing in the Code of Hammurabi, ruler of Babylon from 2285-2242 B.C. Known as *Lex Talionas* it can be described as the law of tit for tat. (1) Jesus’ listeners heard it as one of three passages of Hebrew scripture, all within the Torah, the first five books of the Bible known traditionally as the “Books of Moses.” Each setting (2) is slightly different, but all are designed toward the same result: justice is to be proportional. These laws were not designed, as we sometimes think, to “get even,” though Leviticus 24:20 is close. They were instead designed to limit revenge by allowing only a proportional loss by the perpetrator.

(1) Barclay, William, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, p. 163

(2) Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21

In other words, if you kill my child—accidentally or otherwise—I do not get to wipe out your whole family. These laws limit retaliation and stop the spiral of hatred of which the human heart is all-too-capable.

But to the consternation of some, Jesus goes further. Jesus articulates an ethical ideal to which Kingdom people—that’s you and me—must constantly strive if we desire to follow him, even if we fail in making the grade. The message is clear enough:

*“But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also....and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.’”*

Think not that we are the only people with “what if” questions about this teaching. Jesus was not speaking rhetorically when he said *“if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”* Palestine at the time of Jesus was under Roman occupation. Roman law required that if a soldier asked you to carry his pack, you had an obligation to carry it one mile. Jesus is making a wildly counter-cultural demand, that not only we do more than asked, but we do it for the oppressor!

So our “what if” questions flow like a waterfall: “What if the Allies had not fought Hitler and Nazi Germany?” “What if the Union had not responded to the attack on Fort Sumter?” “What if it is my son, brother, daughter, sister, mother, father who is attacked? These questions are not rhetorical, either in the realm of nations or the sanctity of our lives and homes. And justice is not always blind and the rights of victims are not always defended, as some of our members well know.

Tomorrow I go to court for robbery. Not me, my 90 year old dad....who was not the thief, but the victim. Last fall his home was burglarized, and enough robberies occurred in a short enough time that the police arrested and charged a man in whose possession, among other things, was my mother’s high school class ring. Now my dad was not home, thank goodness. Because this accused thief also has a drug connection and a rap sheet of violence; and because my father, as a retired police officer, would likely have gone for the shotgun beside his bed. A shotgun which, when he checked it later, would not have fired.

So I might have been going to his funeral instead of his court case. This alternate scenario is one which all of his sons, including two of the four with pistol permits, agree might well have happened.

So to our current situation, I have neither time nor knowledge to reflect extensively on “stand your ground” laws. I am not a lawyer or a student of constitutional and criminal law, so extensive comment from me would be, as the medical people like to say “beyond my scope of practice.” It is enough for this message to say that these laws, existing in some form in 46 states, have precedents in the United States well over 100 years and are based on the “castle doctrine” which states that a person has no duty to retreat when their home is attacked. In some forms of the law, the location in which one has no duty to retreat is expanded, with Florida’s law being one of the most expansive.

This expansive definition of self-defense makes me wonder if the Christian message is losing. To be sure, there is a sense in which the Christian message has often “lost.” Our Lord and Savior received capital punishment for the crime of treason against Rome and the abdication of responsibility by the governor Pilate. Yet I wonder whether we, in the church, have done all we can to promote the spread of love; to remind ourselves and others that the neighbor we have not yet met is also a child of God for whose salvation Christ has died; and whether we have taught enough that there are times when detachment and disengagement is the most loving thing to do. However obnoxious texting and loud music can be, no one deserves to die for them. One thing is for sure: in light of these cases there is much work to do and that work requires us to stand against a culture of fear and violence.

So what can Christians do about these matters? Much! Here are three starting points:

First, with respect to Jesus’ teaching—notice that I didn’t even get to the “loving your enemies” part of this text!—we need to conduct what the 12-step programs call Step 4: “make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Where and when are we inclined to repay evil with evil? Where and when have we prayed for our enemies? Again, I

am going to court tomorrow and I am not “feeling” praying for the man who robbed my father. But I must, you see, I must. And so must we all.

Second, we need to consider concrete steps by which we can stop the cycle of violence and retaliation. Being with other Christians goes a long way. So does talking about our anger and fear, especially if we have been victimized in the past: by bullying, by threats of physical or emotional violence, by crime. If we need professional intervention: get it. Anger management: do it. Skills in avoiding and minimizing confrontation: get ‘em. Seeking help in these ways is not a sign of weakness but of strength and, equally important, spiritual maturity. I know some of you have taken these steps and, respecting your privacy and confidentiality, I applaud you publicly today.

Third, remember who you are. Nobody ever said being a Christian was easy. If it was, everyone would do it. Jesus addresses this in the final verses of today’s Gospel: *“If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors—translate for Jesus’ day, “cheats and traitors”—do the same?”* Being a Christian can be hard work but in the challenge are the blessings of love and peace.

Let me conclude by looking at the last verse of today’s passage: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.”* On my list of “Things I wish Jesus had never said” this is near the top. For at face value we say “Um, excuse me, Reverend, but exactly *who* can do that?” But here’s what we miss. The word translated “perfect” (3) in the original Greek is *teleios* (tel-i-os), meaning “complete” with respect to various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character. Jesus was exhorting us not to do everything right, for who can do that; but to do “every right thing” that brings spiritual completeness.

So I end with Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in “The Message:”

*“In a word, what I’m saying is, ‘Grow up.’ You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”*

(3) New Revised Standard, King James, Jerusalem, English Standard Version, Douay-Rheims, the Good News Bible, Holman Christian Standard among many others