

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
February 19, 2017
Matthew 5:38-48

Live Generously, Seek Reconciliation

In the world of foreign affairs and warfare there is theory of retaliation if some country injures your country in some way. When the United States is somehow injured by another country the theory that is usually employed is the theory of “proportional response.” In other words, strike back in a similar way, with similar damage as we were struck. The hope here is that by striking back with a like injury, or proportional response, it will cause cooler heads to prevail in the offending country and the violent engagement won’t escalate to full-blown hot war.

This theory, of course, sounds an awful lot like what we read in the scripture from Matthew this morning. It’s called the “law of the tooth.” In olden days, in the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, the saying or maxim of response was “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” In other words, yes, it was okay to retaliate, but do so in a way that is just, in a way that was equal to injury you received.

But, here’s the thing, justice alone doesn’t necessarily solve anything. Yes, getting justice can be somewhat of a balm for the person who was wronged in the first place. It can feel good for awhile. It rarely is completely and eternally a response that satisfies the pain or the hurt people cause each other, either on a personal level or really on an international level. It may also not be any kind of solution to the rudimentary differences between the antagonists.

Justice without mercy, justice without true forgiveness, justice simply executed to inflict an equal amount of pain fails to resolve the underlying brokenness between people and nations. Thomas Aquinas once said, “Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; justice without mercy is cruelty.” If you want to keep your neighbor at a cold distance, if you want to maintain a sense of “mutually assured destruction” with your neighbor, or relative, or another nation, keep on seeking justice alone without mercy, forgiveness, or reconciliation.

Justice and mercy both come from God, just as love does. We humans, as children of God created in God’s image, need them all to heal, to be healed, to be whole. Fighting injustice while seeking justice is right, but getting justice is incomplete without reconciliation. Without mercy and forgiveness combined with justice the proportional response just keeps going around in circles. You hit me, I hit back. You injure me again and I injure you right back. And on and on and on. It becomes a cycle of mutual destruction rather than a work of healing and reconciliation that can end the cycle of mutual destruction and pain.

Sometimes in our relationships with one another, one party needs to stop the cycle and reach out in forgiveness and mercy. Someone needs to swallow their pride or eliminate their fear. As our Bible lesson from Matthew and Eugene Peterson’s interpretation says,

“No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.” When Jesus was on the cross, suffering one of the most horrible punishments and deaths ever concocted by the twisted mind of humanity, he didn’t call upon God to make sure that Pontius Pilate was crucified one day. He didn’t ask God for the death penalty for those religious leaders who felt threatened by Jesus’ message of love and change and who felt Jesus was stirring up foment. Instead, what does Jesus ask for? “Forgive them for they know not what they do?” (Luke 23:34) He forgives his executioners and asks God to forgive them as well. You cannot get more generous than that. Jesus wanted his death on the cross to end this insane cycle of taking a tooth for a tooth, or proportional response, of justice without mercy and failure to make efforts toward reconciliation.

Friends, sometimes when you have been hurt by someone, or feel cheated by someone, we just need to, as they say, to “suck it up,” walk away for awhile, cool down, but return in love with mercy and work with your *opponent of the moment* to bring about not just justice but also mutual healing and forgiveness. For if we leave it at simply getting justice for ourselves and new world, a new relationship will never become a reality. We will just go on hurting each other without true, meaningful reconciliation. Many times striking out in some kind of violent way—physically or emotionally—is just a temporary measure rather than a permanent solution.

Peterson’s echo of the Good News of Matthew tells us, “In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. [You are] kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” Each one of us was created in the image of God. Each one of us is an integral part of the divinity of God—the same divine nature that Jesus lived and spread back in his day and is still spreading today. Every time you get the urge to strike back, to retaliate, to take a tooth for a tooth and eye for an eye, call upon that divine love of God that is in your true nature. Cool down first. Take a deep breath (for our breath is infused with the Spirit of God). Forgive them. Then find a time to talk over your pain with those who have caused it. Ask them to forgive you for whatever it was that inspired within them the need to strike. Break the cycle. This then is the way true reconciliation can occur. From this, friendships can be born or restored; relationships can be healed, and you can grow in maturity, and reflect more the God-given divine love that is within you.

Live like you are part of God’s divinity. Live like you are already living within God’s kingdom. Live generously in all things. Because you can choose right now to do so. It’s yours for the choosing. Amen.