

Sermon for Sunday, February 23, 2014 Epiphany 7 Matt 5:38-48 "Surprise Them"

If you meander through the parts of the Old Testament concerning laws – that's Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and some of Exodus, in the Torah, if you're interested – you'll find some very specific rules about payback.

If your bull gores one of your animals, you've got to pay them back with a live animal. If somebody steals your ox, they have to pay you back five oxen. If they steal your sheep, they have to pay you back four sheep. If you rape a virgin, you must pay her father fifty silver shekels (about \$500), and you've got to marry her – boy, that's a real joy for the new bride, eh? There are long lists of reparations in the Hebrew Bible, all of which are based upon the notion that if you cause harm, you must pay for the harm you have caused.

It's what is called the *lex talionis*, that idea of retributive justice that is so neatly codified as "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" in the Book of Exodus. You are not entitled to all-out revenge when you are harmed – the retribution must be equal to your loss. This principle dates back to Hammurabi's law code, and it's something that we still use to this day in courts of law when people sue someone for some perceived harm. There are complicated rules about actual loss, pain, change in financial circumstances as a result of the injury...the calculation of what is a fair award is a source of a substantial body of law. Think about it. If you were a fireman killed in the twin towers on 9/11 and your family sued the owners of the building for not making it sufficiently strong to withstand the impact of the planes, how much should you get? Let's say you were 35 years old, with a wife and three kids. How much? The equivalent of your salary and benefits for the next 30 years, since you won't be there to support your family? But what if you had already had one injury on the job, and it was looking like you wouldn't be able to do the job for more than a few years, because that bad back was going to come back? What if your wife earned a whole lot of money as a physician?

What if you were a bond trader, also 35, with a wife and three kids? You made vastly more per year than the fireman – the prior year you had earning a million dollars – but you were also in a higher risk profession, where you might be fired at any time if you didn't make your sales goals. But your wife doesn't work outside the home. Should she receive the equivalent of 20 more years of a million dollars, or something less? How does a judge decide what an award should be?

It makes your head spin, doesn't it? All those numbers, and you couldn't possibly make everyone feel like they were treated fairly, and there is no precedent for every situation.

How do you calculate the cost of harm, and demand recompense for it?

But here we have Jesus, continuing the conversation he was having with the crowd near the Mount last week, saying, "throw out the whole system. None of it works, because it is not based on what's really important."

Do you think every owner of livestock who had had to pay out in oxen when their ox got loose sighed in relief? Do you think that everyone whose sheep got stolen thought "hey, wait a minute! I want to be repaid for that sheep?"

Jesus suggests something very different. Once again, as in the gospel passage from last week, he is saying, "I'm not about the lists of rules, I'm about what underlies the rules. It won't be so easy, but it will ultimately be closer to what is expected of us all."

He says to forget about revenge, about retribution, about recompense. Forget about getting anything back when you've been harmed or injured or disrespected. Forget about measuring exactly how bad things are so you can squeeze exactly the same amount back from the one who harmed you.

Simply turn the other cheek.

Take it. Put up with it.

And everyone who has ever watched WWF or a football game or Judge Judy says, "Hey, wait a minute. I'm supposed to do nothing? That's crazy. If I don't respond, then I'm just a doormat that people can step on. If I'm a doormat once, I'll be a doormat again and again. That's the dumbest idea that I've ever heard of."

If Jesus had said "do nothing," those folks would be right. But that's not what he says. Yes, he says, take it. But return something to them, these people who cause you harm. Offer them the other cheek to hit – it will definitely surprise them. If someone is suing you for nonpayment of a debt and is asking the judge for your coat as compensation, give them the coat and your cloak as well. That will surprise them. If someone is begging from you, give them what they want, and then some. That will surprise them. If you pray for someone, don't just pray for the folks who are easy to like. Pray for your enemies. That will surprise them.

My friend Phil, who is rector of a church in California, says something interesting about this gospel story:

"Quite often, when I'm talking to people about the fact that Jesus' fundamental desire for us is to love one another, and that His emphatic statement is that to love each other IS to fulfill every commandment, someone will ask, "Isn't that just going easy on people?"

To which I respond, "Try loving everyone you meet. You tell me if it's easy."

The fundamental message of love is not softsoap. It is not pabulum. It is not some Cliffs Notes commentary of the Bible, or some edited, sweetened, kindergarten version of the Gospel: It is the whole package.

Love everyone all the time always. Everything else is just noise."

Amen, Phil. What Jesus is demanding of us is not merely following a payback checklist so we can get someone off our backs, it is loving them, actively loving them, even when it is hard, even when they have hurt us, even when we find it hard to find anything lovable in them.

Jesus ups the ante, once again. And then he finishes with the real kicker: "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Be perfect. And how do we do this? Simply by loving, and boy, is it hard!

Now let me make it clear that Jesus is not saying that you should ignore the pain that has been caused to you, the hurt you have suffered...you have to do something about it. You have to conquer those who harm you with love. You have to say, "Yes, you did these things, and it hurt me. But you are a child of God and I am a child of God, so I will love you and pray for you and hope that you will sense God's care for you and stop doing hurtful things." You don't have to like them. You DO have to love them, so that there is a chance that they will have that smack my head moment when they realize that their way isn't the right way.

Do I think I'm perfect? No. I regularly find it hard to forgive the idiot who cut me off in traffic, the hacker who sent me pornographic spam, the man who shot a teenager over loud music and didn't even think he was wrong to do so, the man who cheated me in a transaction...but I try my darnedest to love them, and pray for them, even if my prayer is "please make that person less of an idiot than he just was to me."

I'm nowhere near perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect, not even close. But I'm going to try to surprise those idiots, even as I pray that some folks whom I offend will surprise me. And I invite you to try to surprise them, too. Amen.