

EVIL FOR EVIL

**Sermon Delivered by Barbara Wheeler
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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“See that none recompense evil for evil unto any man.” There it is, your theme for the summer, in the Bible, in fact, in the book of the Bible that scholars believe is oldest written portion of the New Testament. If someone says, point: “An eye for an eye,” you have the counterpoint: “Recompense/repay no one evil for evil.” This is an especially direct statement of your theme in scripture, but it’s only one of many: turn the other cheek (Lam 3:30); love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44); do good to those who hate you (Luke 6:27); do not avenge yourselves; if your enemy is hungry, feed him (Rom 12:19-20). Revenge, it seems, is not only not sweet; it’s not Biblical.

If you read through the wonderful Dudley/Chase history of this congregation, however, you will see that, especially in the first century of the church’s existence, its leaders were preoccupied with punishing those who were found to have broken church and civil laws. In the earliest decades, members’ attention seems to have been divided between the project of putting a steeple on the church building and calling to account a man named Asa Abbott, who was strongly suspected of stealing chickens from several of his neighbors. There were numerous meetings. Abbott first claimed that the chickens some had seen cooked on his table were his; then he admitted that they were not but had invaded his garden and pigpen and he thought he had a right to them. Excommunication was threatened; Abbott left for Great Barrington and sent an unsatisfactory response from there. He did not show up when invited to meet with church leaders. But then, when he returned to Rensselaerville, the minister talked with him and persuaded him to confess. “He agreed to meet with the church,” say the Session minutes, “and the church agreed to receive him into regular standing, which was impressed by their severally taking him by the hand and expressing...future wishes that they might work together in love and friendship” (18-19).

A later controversy, with Reuben H. Stanton, accused of visiting houses of ill repute in Albany, while there swearing profanely, and then bribing his companion not to report him to the church, did not end in reconciliation. Stanton was tried on these charges in 1838 and “excommunicated from the fellowship of the church,” according to the record. Almost certainly, that meant that he became a pariah in the community as well. If we were to read through the minutes of meetings during this congregation’s first century, we would no doubt find many more investigations of members’ behavior, confrontations between church leaders and those members, formal trials and probably several more excommunications, temporary or, like Stanton’s permanent.

And you did not have to steal chickens or visit prostitutes to come under scrutiny by the elders of the church. Before communion services—and they would have been few and far between, at more quarterly and perhaps only once a year—[before communion services], the Session would review the records of all church members. Those whose behavior in the recent interval had been exemplary would be given a token. There is a picture of one on the cover of your service leaflet.



It is not yours (the initials probably stand for Reformed Presbyterian Church) but it is early American and something similar was probably used here. If you had not been upstanding enough, you would have been denied a token, and you would not have been permitted to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. No doubt your neighbors would have been curious about what you did to deserve your exclusion.

So how does all this crime and punishment square with the command in scripture: “See that none recompense evil for evil unto any man”? What would those who first sat where you are sitting today have to say about this summer's theme, “An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind?”

I think our forebears were just as aware as we are that pay back sets off a cycle of mutual hatred that ultimately destroys everyone, victim and aggressor alike. They would join you in condemning retribution, pay back for the pay back's sake, the satisfaction that human beings seem naturally to find in inflicting as much pain on their tormentors as those persons have inflicted on them. An eye for an eye may not accomplish much in the long run—but in the short term it feels good to hurt someone who has hurt you. Presbyterians in an earlier day would urge restraint just as we do, and they would quote this scripture as they did so: “Be at peace among yourselves.... Be patient with all men.”

But I think that they would also have used our passage from Thessalonians to make the case that, for offenses that deeply alienate us from God or that take something valuable away from our neighbor, some kind of payment is due. “Admonish those that are out of order,” it says. The Geneva Bible authors added one of their famous footnotes to this line: “As the disease is, so must the remedy be used.” Revenge/payback, they would have said, is wrong, but discipline/payment is necessary. Without it, both human communities and our covenant with God are likely to fall apart.

The church has mostly got out of the discipline business these days. Denominations do put clergy accused of serious offenses on trial and punish them if they are found guilty, but at the congregational level, the behavior of individual members is viewed as none of the church's business. For churches like this one, being good, doing God's will, is mostly a collective, public matter: in our prayers and sermons we tell God and each other that we should engage, together with others in church and society, in the quest for peace and justice, in modelling respect for diverse religions and culture, in taking care of the earth and conserving its resources, and in acts of compassion for those who are suffering or in acute need. We rarely, or never, confess or pray or preach about our personal weaknesses and failings: anger, jealousy, cowardice, pride, the need to control others, our addictions to power, wealth and pleasure. If this were an ordinary Sunday, I would be asking you to write prayer requests on the white cards in the pews. Here are the kinds of things that probably wouldn't be written: “Pray that I will find the strength to spend more for the needs of others and less on myself.” “Pray that I will be cured of my secret addiction to on-line gambling.” “Help my child who is into drugs or my spouse who is prone to violence.” The

consensus is that these and many other serious offenses—unfaithfulness, arrogance, greed—along with deep fears and insecurities, don’t belong in church. We keep them at home, behind the screen of privacy, sharing them with our therapist, our oldest friend, and maybe, confidentially, with a pastor. We would never ask, never expect, the members of the church community to help us deal with them.

We do not, of course, want to go back to the days of the church council snooping into our personal lives. There may have been a compelling needs for it then. Most people in this community lived pretty close to the line. One effective chicken thief could leave quite a few families hungry and undernourished. Drunkenness, a frequent charge against church members, was not a life-style choice. Everyone drank alcohol—water made people sick—and workingmen frequently drank too much, with disastrous consequences for their families. In short, the public and private were hard to distinguish. If a congregation wanted to make the world a better place—and this one did, getting involved in temperance, the anti-slavery movement and probably women’s rights—the place to begin was at home and in church.

And that may be truer today than we usually think. Those atrocities that you may have had in mind when you chose this year’s theme—the massacre of children in Newtown, Connecticut, for instance, or of church members in Charleston: In those cases and many more, it emerged that families had struggled for years with an easily-led or deeply-troubled member. They never reached out to either church or community, so no one was in a position either to offer help or to urge accountability.

Imagine how freeing it would be if our church or synagogue or mosque were a place where we could bring our hopes and fear and regrets as well as our socially-acceptable concerns like health and travel, which form the vast majority of prayer requests in this and other Presbyterian churches. What if our houses of worship were places where we could offer each other support at a deep level; where we could find colleagues to keep us accountable; where others would help us decide, when we have done something really wrong, what are the meaningful measures that will help us and those we have hurt to heal. Maybe, if our congregations and the communities around them were more open about personal life, about the need we all have for accountability and discipline and love and support, maybe there were be fewer of those loners whose families knew they were prone to violence but felt they had to hide them; fewer alienated young people who are easily radicalized; fewer bullies, abusers, harassers. Maybe there would be less moral blindness, less evil, and less of the powerful need for revenge, to return evil for evil, that is coming at us from all sides these days. Maybe our predecessors in this church who insisted on crossing the public/private line had some important insights about human life; about how, with God’s help, to make it better; about how to love God and neighbor with our whole heart and mind and strength, with our “whole spirit and soul and body.” Let’s use the occasions this summer on which we celebrate our history to learn from those who have gone before, so that, as their version of the Bible says, “the very God of peace may sanctify us throughout.”

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