

SECOND READING: Matthew 5:1, 38-48

5 When Jesus[Ⓜ] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:...³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so 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 on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING: Exodus 21: 1,22-26

21 "These are the ordinances that you shall set before them...²² "When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. ²³ If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

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“An Eye for an Eye”

On October 2, 2006, a shooter entered a small Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, PA and shot ten girls, aged 6 -13, killing five and seriously wounding five before committing suicide himself. While the country was horrified and the media swirled with coverage of the terrible details, reports also began to surface of the response from the Amish community, for it was one of forgiveness and reconciliation. For instance, on the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives, “We must not think evil of this man”, just as another Amish father said, “He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he is standing before a just God.” Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lancaster County, explained, “I don’t think there’s anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.” An Amish neighbor reportedly comforted the shooter’s sobbing father in his arms for hours after the shooting, the Amish set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter, many attended his funeral, and one victim’s family invited his widow, an outsider, to their daughter’s funeral. His widow wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, “Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need, and your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this, we sincerely thank you.”¹

Indeed, their love has had an impact on the world, for it leads us and so many others to consider the Gospel passage read today from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus quotes a well-known Jewish Law, when he says, “*You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*” Many ancient civilizations had a similar law. It appears in the earliest known code of laws, the Code of Hammurabi, (c. 2200 BCE). It’s called the *Lex Talionis*, meaning the law of retaliation. Jesus included it in his Sermon on the Mount for a purpose no doubt because during his time, there was a gross misunderstanding of it. And, brothers and sister, there still is.

¹Deacon Sill. “Justice or Forgiveness”?. www.deaconsil.com/content/resource/99766.html. (accessed 8-11-23).

Contrary to how it might sound upon first hearing, the law's original aim was as a law of mercy, to limit vengeance. You see, in the very early tribal times, the "Vendetta" was characteristic of societal functioning. If a man of one tribe offended someone of another tribe, say stole a pig or injured a man, then all the members of the other tribe could take vengeance on all the members of the offender's tribe; and the vengeance could be nothing less than death to all. This "eye for an eye" law, the Lex Talionis, laid down that only the man who committed the offense could be punished, and his punishment must be no more than equivalent to the injury and damage that he originally inflicted.

Additionally, the law that Jesus referred to, in the Jewish society was never one which gave a private individual the right to extract vengeance themselves; it was always designed as a law which laid down how a **judge in the law court** must assess punishment. It was a law for the judicial system not the public arena. Nor was it one that allowed for justice to be carried out literally. The Jews rightly knew that if it did, the reverse of justice might realistically have occurred (i.e there could have been a displacement of a good eye for a bad one or a good tooth for a bad tooth).²

But, as I said, in Jesus' day, this law's original aim in its limiting scope of retaliation and in its restriction to the public sphere had lost its focus³...as it has in ours. They had gone backwards as have we. BACKWARDS! There were places as there are now where a woman, for instance, could be stoned for running away from their abusive husband, for defying their father, or for suspected adultery. The punishment for treachery was horrible, as it can be now, if it is done offshore.⁴ There are places even now where public lashings, beheadings, and more atrocities in the name of retaliation still occur. Even if not physical, maybe in more "civilized places", retribution frequently takes the form these days of character assassinations, business takeovers, bullying to the extreme. We ARE frankly a society where "might makes right" and revenge has been normalized. We have reverted to social Darwinism wherein the strong prevail and the weak perish. How often do we hear and accept phrases like "*if you do this to me, I*

² Deacon Sill.

³ Jacob Gerber. "*An Eye for an Eye*" <https://harvestpca.org/sermons/an-eye-for-an-eye-matthew-538-42/> (accepted 8-11-23).

⁴ Nancy Rockwell. "*Revenge*". <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bitintheapple/revenge/> (accessed 8-11-23).

have the right to do that to you”! “You aggrieve me in some way, you hurt me in some way, I will bring that right back onto you and more.”

Soooo, not only do we need then to remember the intent of the original Lex Talionis, but we also need to go where Mt 5, where Jesus, moves us. FORWARD. BEYOND. He says, *“But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”* A bit of background context helps here. In Jesus’ day to be slapped on the right cheek, by someone facing you, who would be using their right hand since left hands were reserved for more unseemly purposes,⁵ would mean that they were giving you a backhanded slap. And backhanded slaps were severe insults, a way a superior would hit an inferior. Equals would use fists. Some scholars have hypothesized that Jesus is saying here that by turning the other cheek, we would give our offender two options, one: to use their fist, which would show them as an equal, or two: to not hit us at all, which would make them look foolish. I think this hypothesis is feasible, but I agree with other scholars that Jesus is not likely interested in getting even or making anyone look foolish. He, instead, is asking us to, by turning the other cheek, open ourselves to the worst insult that anyone could give, the backhanded slap with the LEFT HAND!⁶ This sends the message that Jesus wants...that we refuse to retaliate, that we will not conform to their rules. It says, “I will forgive you”.

Similarly, Jesus goes on to say that if anyone wants to sue us and take our shirt, then we need give our them our coats as well. Back then, under civil law, one’s outer garment could be confiscated for nonpayment of debt. If you were poor, this outer garment also served as a blanket at night. So, what Jesus is saying is that if our offender is so unfeeling as to take our outer garment, then we need give them our inner one too. We need not return evil with evil.

And in one final example, Jesus advises that if anyone forces us to go one mile, we should go also the second mile. The Romans back then could legally ask civilians to carry their gear for 1 mile. Jesus’ request is that when they asked more, to carry it further, which they often did,

⁵Jim Summerville. *“Hit Me with Your Best Shot”* <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/a13-the-seventh-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a/>. accessed 8-11-23).

⁶Jim Summerville.

we need send the message that we do not stoop to being like them. Our intent is to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. (*Pause*)

Brothers and sisters, this is indeed a troublesome passage because to not misuse it, we need first understand the referred to law's original good intent, and we need then understand Jesus expansion of its meaning, his direction to go beyond it. But, you know, I think it is also troublesome because, because, well we're being asked to do something so very hard. It is so very hard to do. And I find that troubling. I always have. Maybe you do too.

However, this week I received some very helpful insight from colleague Rev. Dr. David Lose who published a commentary where he advises that he personally has found relief in jumping to the end of the whole pericope...to the part that seems even more ridiculous, that part that says, "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.*" He reminds readers that the translation of "perfect" is "*telos*" which implies less a moral perfection than the reaching of one's intended outcome. (The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches.) This means that Jesus' final words in this passage are to "*Be the person that God created you to be, just as God is the God, God is supposed to be.*"⁷

Consequently, Jesus' words, his expansion of the eye for an eye law, become less a command than a promise. Quoting Dr. Lose, "*God sees more in us than we do. God has plans and a purpose for us. God intends to use us to achieve something spectacular...to help create a different kind of world, called the kingdom of God—where violence doesn't always breed more violence and hate doesn't always kindle more hate.*"⁸

Brothers and sisters...this is helpful. No, we will not always be able to do what Jesus commands here, not perfectly anyway, but our job is to try...to take seriously that we are being called to claim our identity as Jesus' chosen and to try to live into who we were created to be...turning the other cheek, forgiving, praying for those who persecute, not returning evil for evil. We need never, ever think this forgets or even minimizes the presence of sin in us or in the world nor does it lessen our call to push back against it. No, but neither does it assume God is

⁷ David Lose. "Epiphany 7A: *Telos*". <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/3piphany-7-a-telos/> (accessed 8-11-23).

⁸ David Lose.

limited by our sin. Rather it recognizes that our work is our work and God's work is God's work. Our work is to help change the world. God's work is to save it.

You recall that one Amish father, who, when speaking of the shooter, said, "*now he's standing before a just God?*" Well, with these words, he was acknowledging that judging was not his place; it belonged only to God! His responsibility was instead to offer the shooter and his family one thing: forgiveness.⁹

Right. Martin Luther once said that the Christian life is not about arriving but always about becoming.¹⁰ Siblings, I pray that today you continue to become, to become the people you have been created you to be, shining light into the darkness and driving out hate with love. And may your week ahead be blessed with grace and freedom and peace. To God be the glory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁹ Deacon Sil.

¹⁰ Quoted in David Lose.