

"Getting Back at Others"

Psalm 35:17-24; Isaiah 53:6-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 22, 2015 – 5th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Psalm 35, our first reading for this morning, is in a category called “lament” psalms. They are a cry for help as a result of some misfortune. Some reflect a disaster which has come upon a community or even the nation. The greater number are personal in nature. They're written from an individual point of view. They reflect the suffering that afflicts just a single person.

In this particular psalm today we have a recitation of the things which have befallen its writer. In the first section the petitioner complains about people who do grievous things against him, who want to bring him down, who repay his good with evil. They are treacherous adversaries who oppose him without apparent cause.

All of this gives him distress, but the pain is even greater because in Hebrew thought suffering was generally understood to be punishment for sin. Therefore anyone under affliction was likely to be mocked by enemies and shunned by friends for bringing this situation upon himself.

When all other attempts fail to resolve the problem, a person could take his concern to the Temple. Here he would begin by listing all the ways he had suffered. Often he would denounce his enemies in vigorous terms and heap curses upon them. By doing so the aggrieved party would seek to turn the evil back against its perpetrators where it rightly belonged.

After presenting his case, the suffering person would spend the night in the Temple hoping for some sign of divine favor. If he received this from the priests, then he would give testimony to God's goodness and make a thank offering. So, as a way of background, that's what is going on here in Psalm 35.

His appeal says: "You have seen this, O Lord; do not be silent. Wake up! Stir yourself for my cause, Lord. Vindicate me, my God, and do not let them rejoice over me."

This is a fairly typical example from the psalms of one who asks God to crush those who work against him. Should this happen he promises to give God the credit, and thus show to all that the Lord is not to be trifled with, that God justifies and rewards the faithful.

These laments with all their violent imagery are generally not among our favorites. Their strong language grates against us. In them we read petitions such as: "O God, break the teeth in their mouth." "Confound their speech. Let death come upon them." "In wrath, cast down the peoples. Repay them for their crime." "Let those who seek to hurt me be covered with scorn and disgrace." "May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow."

This is pretty strong stuff. It's not what I'd put on the reading list for a new believer. I think, however, they tell us less about God and more about us. They reveal our human desire to want to get back at those who wrong us. In this way they're true to life.

Whether we admit it or not, we like to see people get their due. It kind of balances out some of the injustice we often experience in life. This may seem like just a reasonable expectation.

I saw a bumper sticker the other day which said, "Do unto others before they do it to you." It's intended to be funny, but that clearly reflects the way some people live. It shows a basic lack of trust and respect for others. "Do unto others before they do it to you" sounds biblical, but it's far from it. This approach looks for the worst in people and justifies taking action against them, even before they might do anything to you.

This is preemptive vengeance, getting back at someone for a wrong it is assumed they will commit. It takes relief from enemies out of God's hands to one's own. It's self-defense taken to an extreme. We see evidence of that thinking in some of the terrorist acts in today's news.

I have trouble with this kind of thought, even when it's expressed right there in some of the psalms. Not that it's wrong to pray for respite from oppressors, but that the request is so vindictive in tone. Perhaps a person deserves to be brought down, but doesn't it lower us morally to pray for that? Though the sentiment for vengeance is understandable, it misses the intention of how God would have us live.

Jesus certainly knew the psalms, as well as the Law and the Prophets. He understood the reality of pain and suffering, both as a person and as a Jew. But his model for the Messiah was not found in our first reading about payback, but in our second reading from Isaiah—a vision of the suffering servant who will come to redeem God's people.

Instead of praying for vengeance, it tells of one willing to bear injustice. "He was oppressed," it says, "and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth." That was the role to which he was called. That was his destiny to fulfill. Jesus bore the sins of humanity on his shoulders so that, through him, we might find life in its fullness.

In ancient times unlimited revenge was the dominant human practice. If you were wronged by someone, then you were free to respond in any way you wanted. It was your right because of what someone had done to you. But the Hebrew people moved to a higher plane when they came to accept the concept of limited retaliation: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Here one could only seek vengeance in proportion to how you, yourself, had been hurt.

Jesus was aware it was time for people to be moved to a higher level yet. He said: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you."

From unlimited retaliation to measured revenge was a giant step in the way of ethically dealing with others. So measured revenge to **no** retaliation, would have been another major advancement for humanity. But Jesus didn't stop there. Instead he leaps all the way to a radically new ethic to replace cursing one's enemy with blessing one's enemy.

Many who heard Jesus had trouble with what he said. They may have thought it asked too much of person. It removed the enjoyment of seeing others pained when they themselves were pained and the satisfaction of getting back at those who had got to them. The scales of simple justice had a comfortable balance, and now it was being said they should be dismantled altogether. This might be an ideal, but not at all practical. Christ's way asked too much. He needed to tone it down and be practical.

Jesus wasn't a politician, though. His understanding of what God asked was not open to debate or negotiation. His call was not to popularity, but to faithfulness. He had to teach what was taught to him. His duty was to initiate a new awareness of God's reign in the world, a new way of living that was beginning right then.

This was good news and not bad, but it meant putting away outmoded understandings and replacing them with fresh ones, better ones. It meant seeing prior ways as past and limiting, and considering instead an expansive approach to life.

Some were ready for what Jesus brought. They followed him and their lives changed accordingly. Others turned their backs and walked away because it simply required too much from them. They were too wedded to the ways they had always done things. The price asked was too high.

Today Jesus' invitation still stands. His words continue to tell us what is required to follow him. The choice is set before us. He knocks at the door of our lives, waiting for us to open it and let him come in. But you see, here's the hard fact: you can't accept him and not accept his ways. That's what it is to be his disciple. Whatever it takes, though, will be worth it.

Faith is more than responding when you can, praying when you're have time, doing what doesn't inconvenience you, giving what you have left over, loving when it doesn't require a change of heart.

You can't follow Jesus and not follow his ways. His challenge to us is not simply to be moderately good people, but to become true disciples. In the process you may have to give up some small pleasures like greed, indifference, envy, lukewarm spirituality, comfortable charity, and—yes—even the satisfaction associated with vengeance. For so are the ways of the Lord. For such is the door which opens up to true life.

Jesus found his own model in loving service to God and to neighbor, and that is the one he holds up for us as well. It hasn't changed in 2000 years and it never will.