

Sermon for March 16, 2008: Retribution on the Road to Jerusalem

Jeremiah 11: 18-20

Luke 19: 29-44

Retribution has at least two sides: when payback somehow seems to have been earned, and when people get nailed for doing the right, but unpopular, thing. There must be hundreds of films that focus on retribution: Mel Gibson's movie "Payback" immediately springs to mind. Less violent movies like "Mean Girls" show the same thing: when people do rotten things, they get their comeuppance. That Brian DePalma classic, "Carrie," was about retribution, telling the story of a bullied girl who snapped, and got bloody revenge on those who had tormented her. People who rejoiced in Governor Spitzer's fall from power experienced this sort of tit for tat; self-righteous behavior seems to aggravate our desire for retribution. When we break the law, when we violate societal codes, when we willfully break trust, we experience retribution.

There is also the retribution that comes from speaking out against what those in power are doing, from speaking out against the norms of society. That's why there are whistleblower laws – to protect those speaking out against injustice or danger in the workplace from being punished for their efforts to illuminate wrong doing, and perhaps in the process, protecting others from harm. The difference between blowing the whistle on bad behavior and ratting out someone is often best described as being in the eyes of the beholder. Violating societal norms can also lead to retribution. So can challenging those in power – and that retribution can threaten pay grades, job status, and physical wholeness.

Jeremiah addressed both kinds of retribution in today's reading. This is the sort of retribution that speaks of justice, of protection, of consequences to choices and behavior. Jeremiah looks to the Lord for justice and protection, since he is doing the will of the Lord. Jeremiah is behaving in a righteous manner, serving the Lord God; Jeremiah has committed his life to this cause, and because of that commitment, people were out to get HIM. One paraphrase of the bible, The Message, translates this reading in part as : "Let's get rid of the preacher. THAT will stop the sermons! Let's get rid of him for good..." and translates Jeremiah's request for payback as "I want to see these people shown up and put down! I'm an open book before You. Clear my name." Jeremiah seeks both protection from the people who want to harm him, and also punishment for them. That's an Old Testament orientation – and by Old Testament standards, it's merciful. An eye for an eye, a hurt for a hurt – not an elimination of entire families or tribes. But still, the notion of forgiveness is not too prevalent in this.

When Jesus speaks of retribution, He is concerned with the future of the city of Jerusalem, and the future of its inhabitants. He knows that if they would let go of their expectations, which are based on the values of the world around them, that they would be able to both bear witness to what they have seen, and also understand what those wonderful signs and miracles point to is not a renewal of the glory of ancient Israel, but the glory of God again with them. He weeps because they have become blind and deaf to His message of repentance, and returning to God. He weeps because He knows that their failure to change their ways is going to lead to a repeat of history –The Temple will again be leveled. Jerusalem will again be destroyed. Because they have insisted on having their own way, they will indeed again experience the consequences of ignoring God. Retribution is coming upon them in part because they have been unwilling to listen to Jesus' words about retribution.

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, starting at the 21st verse and continuing to the end, six times Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." and then He lays out

some guidance for retribution – and those standards are extremely tough on His listeners. Let me sum them up for you:

- If we are angry or insult another, we are liable to be judgement ourselves;
- If we look at one another with lust we are already sinning;
- If we get divorced for almost any reason, we may be causing others to sin, as well as ourselves;
- If we use religious talk to say things we don't mean, we are making things worse for ourselves; speak plainly;
- If someone is mean to us, practice generosity anyway;
- If enemies do wrong to us, pray for them anyway – we are not to allow someone else to control our behavior. Instead, we are to imitate God – giving blessings to all, even those who don't deserve it.

These standards are daunting – and a reminder that if this is the yardstick God uses, we're all in trouble. So if we wish for vengeance, for retribution, we need to be careful, because we also will face vengeance and retribution. Jesus did not go to the cross for retribution or payback. He went to show mercy and forgiveness. Even on the cross, He forgave His tormenters, not only the Roman soldiers who carried out His crucifixion, but also all of those who mocked Him when the death sentence was carried out. They mocked Jesus because His behavior was so opposite what they would have done – what we would have done. Jesus doesn't say that consequences don't happen – but He does say that hurtful things don't need to have a place in our behavior. We can choose how to respond – and we don't have to behave in hateful ways. We can hold people accountable for their behavior – and still leave the final retribution to God. All of us are dependent on God's mercy.

We are engaged in a ministry that is to honor the Lord, who has called us by name. But how? The apostle Paul speaks of this paradox in his second letter to the Corinthians, and shows us how regular human beings can start to live this out. Second Corinthians, chapter four, starting at the first verse: **“Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God... For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, “let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**

“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

On the road to Jerusalem, opportunities for retribution will arise. Let us put them aside, looking instead to Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, as we continue to run this race with perseverance, until He returns in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus!

Jeremiah 11: 18-20

It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew; then You showed me their evil deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!" But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see Your retribution upon them, for to You I have committed my cause.

Luke 19: 29-44

When He had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As He rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As He was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, order Your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As He came near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."