

Rev. Derek Fairman

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time A

In all kinds of literature, ancient and modern, a common plot device is the need for vengeance. Maybe at the beginning of the story, the villain commits some unspeakable crime and then the hero must find a way to meet the villain face to face and then kill him. This plot has been used several times, because it is a dramatic ploy that speaks to a great temptation for us as human beings: the desire to right the wrong that someone has done to us by hurting them. Somehow the process of hurting the other *seems* to alleviate our own hurts.

Yet the Lord teaches us about returning the favor to someone who has hurt us. He teaches us that it is not right for us to take “an eye for an eye” and a “tooth for a tooth.” He teaches us that the commandment that He gives us is far greater. His commandment is that we should offer no resistance to one who is evil. The commandment He gives us is one of love and not vengeance. It is love that will right the wrongs of this world, not vengeance.

This commandment raises a number of questions. First of all, why does the Old Testament say, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?” The Old Testament is an intermediary teacher, which helps us prepare for the fullness of the truth found in the Gospels. You might remember that lesson from last week. Now, this teaching exists to hinder the perpetuation of violence. If someone took something of yours, your first reaction might be to do something worse. That is taking vengeance. If you do something worse, the person might do something even worse than that, and then you would do something to top that person’s reaction. This would lead to an endless cycle of violence perpetuating itself.

On the other hand, if you only exact a punishment that is equal to the crime, this does not make the cycle go on endlessly. This tries to establish a certain justice. In other words, if someone took something of yours, you might take something of his or hers. There would be a certain truce, and you would both get what is yours back. This is because the point is not to exact vengeance on someone, but to promote justice. That is the point of the teaching, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

There is a problem, however, with this system. The relationship between you and this person is still not right. There may be a kind of justice that rises above personal vengeance. Yes, you have what belongs to you, but as long as the person hates you and you hate that person, what is to stop the person from taking something else? What is to stop you from taking what belongs

