

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for February 20, 2011
Lessons: Leviticus 19:9-18,33-34 and Matthew 5:38-48

TURNING THE TIDE

“You have heard that it was said . . . , but I say to you” With Jesus’ coming, the old must give way to the new flowing into this world. In the past, rules were laid down to regulate the evils that people do to each other, to restrain angry and jealous passions and minimize the damage. The famous Law of Retribution — “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life” — placed equitable and legal limits upon revenge. Just one eye could be put out in retribution for the victim’s eye, just one life and no more taken in retribution for a single killing, whether intentional or accidental. The law was meant to stem the tide of revenge represented in the Bible by the figures of Cain and his descendant Lamech who brags to his wives that he has killed a young man for striking him and that his idea of revenge is wholesale slaughter.¹ Lamech represents all those who hit back much harder, who revel in brutality, who equate vengeance with strength and manhood. Of course, as centuries passed and humanity became somewhat more civilized, the very law laid down to restrict retribution came to be used to demand retribution. *No more* than a life for a life became *no less* than a life for a life, and so we have today people who insist that the Bible requires executions.

Not content merely to stem the tide of brutality and vengeance, restraining evil, Jesus gives us these “hard teachings” to turn that tide so that life becomes a movement toward the kingdom of God. Knowing what to do with his hard teachings, however, is a problem Christians have struggled to resolve. For example, what would happen if you literally and directly gave money to anyone and everyone who asked you for it? Churches and ministers face this problem. If we give out cash to people who profess to be in need of assistance, word gets around very quickly, and soon we are, in effect, buying drugs for people until the assistance money runs out. I don’t think that’s what Jesus has in mind.

Neither is he encouraging endless dependency. One of the scandals of our time is the move by rich nations and multinational investors to buy up arable land in earth’s poorest countries for their own food security or just for huge profits by offering their leaders both the money or military aid for the purchase and, perhaps, food aid for their people whose land is being sold. Taking farmland in exchange for food aid is neither justice nor charity; it can reduce the people to semi-slave labor and permanent dependency as it provides large investment returns for speculators.²

Various methods have been employed to neutralize Jesus' hard teachings. Some Dispensationalist writings simply consign them to a bygone era, thereby claiming they no longer apply to Christians these days. Such setting aside of the Sermon on the Mount becomes especially virulent as Jesus risen is recast as the vindictive Christ whose triumph will be, not redeeming the world for God, but casting all his enemies into hell. Among more mainline Christians, Jesus' hard teachings seem often reduced to mere niceties or else postponed indefinitely as the ways of the someday kingdom God, beautiful as ideals, but impractical for the present. Love our enemies? That one will have to wait until we have no more enemies to fear or hate. Give to everyone who asks? That one can wait until there is such abundance in our paradise that demand could never approach the wealth of supply, but as long as there is competition for limited resources — well, no, not yet.

Let's start where Jesus starts, with our relatedness to God which creates our relatedness to each other in this world and with God's coming to make that relatedness the new basis for getting along with each other. This coming situation is what Jesus calls the kingdom of God. That God is the Parent who loves us all becomes now the decisive factor in life, family, community, and human society on earth, and so the tide must turn. "We" and "they" are being merged by God's redemptive love.

It's not a matter of just literally giving away money. It's a matter of pitting generosity, compassion, and a spirit of kinship with people in need against the prevailing tides of self-interest, stinginess, indifference, and contempt for the poor. For Jesus, life is to be shared rather than bartered for advantage. Literally handing over one's money might not be helpful in a given situation, but the spirit of all-for-themselves must go. So, if giving money to anyone who asks for it is not only impractical but unhelpful, then the question becomes, "What is helpful for the person in need and for the human community?" How can life be made equitable and shared generously with our sisters and brothers because God is the Parent of all?

Surely loving one's enemies does not mean standing back while the brutal terrorize people, overrun societies, and enslave those they conquer whether by force of arms or by economic conquest. Jesus is pitting the spirit that seeks mutual understanding and respect, forgiveness, and reconciliation squarely against the spirit that seeks revenge, dominance, and the destruction of the other. The battle cry of the supposedly strong, "Make them fear us" he is replacing with, *Show them the love of God and give them reason to trust us.*

Turning the tide is no easy matter. It can require standing up to one's enemies and denying them the dominance or victory they seek, but it does not then go further to shame them, reducing them to subjugation and misery. This new spirit seeks an even hand in human relations rather than the upper hand. It seeks to heal and reconcile, not to destroy or

humiliate. So, it must be just as tough as the warrior but with a different purpose and a very different goal in mind: not destruction, but equity and perhaps reconciliation.

The kingdom of God comes to turn the tide of human life across lands and around the earth, but God's love for the world is always personal for the individual as well. It is never just a big program or movement that uses people as pawns or "breaks a lot of eggs" to make the omelet. That's our way, not God's. Neither can the spirit of the kingdom of God be confined to individual piety without regard for the destruction and misery of millions of people in human societies. Relatedness is the key because God comes in love, not power; in truth, redemptive love is God's power. The individual all alone is a fiction; there is no such thing. But because God loves, the individual has the same importance to God as the whole world. If we learn that lesson, we are beginning to see from Jesus' point of view.

Make no mistake, people who see life in terms of power and acquisition hate Jesus' point of view, even if they call themselves by his name. That's why the most belligerent Christians want the Sermon on the Mount set aside, put away, and even nullified in the name of the conquering and vindictive Christ they prefer because they made him in their own image. But overcoming evil in the way of Jesus requires giving oneself for the sake of others, including one's enemies. And giving ourselves does not always mean dying; it is a way of life to which Jesus calls us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not just teaching ethics or religious behavior; he is turning the tide against the ever-flowing animosity that ravages human life. The macho script calls for revenge, and the public feeds on it. During hard economic times, we look around for scapegoats to blame for our troubles. We pick helpless enemies to make ourselves feel strong, and empowered we become but only to do evil.

But if Jesus' hard teachings provoke us to ask, "How?" we are on our way toward joining him in turning the tide from death to life. Then we start walking together, sharing that question of, *How?* We engage each other. What does the poor person think? What does the frightened one fear? What dreams does she or he have? What are your hopes and dreams? What are your beliefs? As we begin to understand each other's hopes and dreams, we grow able to perceive the hurts and disappointments along life's way and the obstacles to be overcome. Then we recognize each other's joys and become able to share them. As we walk together, we learn to respect and trust each other. But the change must start somewhere, and Jesus calls for it to start with us. Amen.

Notes:

1. Genesis 4:23-24

2. Numerous articles and reports. For example, a cautiously critical article in the Financial Times appears here (reading it all requires free registration):

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6b08189e-d65a-11df-81f0-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1EOjWEgfM>

From the Guardian, this:

<< Devinder Sharma, analyst with the Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security in India, predicted civil unrest. "Outsourcing food production will ensure food security for investing countries but would leave behind a trail of hunger, starvation and food scarcities for local populations," he said. "The environmental tab of highly intensive farming – devastated soils, dry aquifer, and ruined ecology from chemical infestation – will be left for the host country to pick up." >>

For the advocacy view of the Oakland Institute:

<http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/?q=node/view/559>