

Eye for an eye

John 13:31-35, Exodus 21:12-27

April 24, 2016

Jesus said: “Now God’s glory is revealed.”

How? Where? What does it look like? You see it, don’t you? God’s glory is all around us. We just have to open our eyes. It is all around us, from the delicate lines and colors of a tiny woodland wildflower to the mind-boggling dimensions of a black hole in deep space, from the gentle plip plop of raindrops onto the surface of a lake on a windless day to the bone-jarring boom of an active thunderhead. The immensity and the complexity, the grandeur and the beauty, the height and breadth and depth and wonder of this universe that leave us in awe all reflect the glory of the God who made it all.

But there’s more. When God made it, God said that it was good. Its goodness is its glory and God’s goodness is God’s glory. The glory of God is not merely about physical grandeur, about height and breadth and depth, but about spiritual grandeur, too, about goodness, about rightness, about righteousness and unequivocal justice, about unwavering faithfulness and constant love. When women and men have glimpsed the glory of God they have been filled not only with awe, but also shame, suddenly aware of their own failings, their own unrighteousness, their own sin in the presence of the Holy One whom they resemble, but who is so unlike them, so good, so pure, so true.

But there’s more. What did Jesus mean when he said, “Now God’s glory is revealed through him?” What did he mean when on the night of his betrayal and arrest he said, “God will reveal the glory of the Son of Man in himself ... [and soon!]?”

“Eye for an eye.” This is the fourth and last of the sermon topics proposed by members of this year’s confirmation class. This particular title was suggested by one of our senior confirmation mentors, Katherine Kaliban. Oh, Katherine! What have you gotten us into?

“Eye for an eye.” It is a simple phrase, but far from innocuous, raising all sorts of difficult and dangerous questions about the nature of justice and retribution and the consequences of hurtful actions. It raises questions about what we may expect when we are injured (and we are) and about what we may expect when we do injury (and we do).

“Eye for an eye.” Does this principle seem to you just or unduly harsh, enlightened or barbaric? Or maybe, some of both? In any case, what we must do is consider it in context, in the context of the time and place in which it was promulgated.

The phrase comes from the Torah, from the book of law, the book of laws, that governed the life and conduct of God’s people after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt and made them his own. Some of the laws, the commandments, were positive appeals: worship the Lord your God who

brought you out of Egypt, keep the sabbath, show honor and respect to your father and mother. And other commandments were negative prohibitions: do not commit murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not accuse anyone falsely.

In other words, do not take. Do not take what is not yours to take: the life, the wife, the belongings, the honor that belong to another. And if you do, what you take will be taken from you, "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

Isn't that fair? In its time, this principle of commensurate punishment was meant to be fair, to be about justice, not about revenge. In its time, it was meant to set limits on retribution, to forbid unrestrained vengeance, as in: you take one of my sheep and I'll burn your house down, you insult my wife and I'll run through with my sword. The life of God's people was not to be governed by personal vendetta and escalating violence, but by the just application of a community-based system of equitable compensation.

"Eye for an eye" was about fairness and it was about value. People matter. Who they are and what they have matters. Life is precious and must be treated so, with honor and respect and deference and care. When you do injury, it matters, because you do harm to something precious, not only to another human being, but also and especially to God. The principle of eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life underscores that value, reminding the people that they may not take whatever they want, whatever they can get, or hurt whomever they want, whomever gets in their way, without consequence.

Now you may have cringed at times, as I did, while I was reading from the book of the law. The death penalty for striking or cursing a parent? No additional punishment for causing fatal injury to a slave, if the slave lives for several days after? The husband gets to decide the necessary compensation for the loss of his wife's fetus? This is a good time to remember that we worship God, not the Bible, and to celebrate the fact that God is still speaking!

And yet, in context, for the times, these rules are rather remarkable, containing within them the seeds of a more comprehensive justice, a more righteous justice, to come. You cannot do whatever you want with your slave, you are held accountable by the community if you do harm, because the slave has inherent rights, inherent value, in himself, in herself. And you cannot do whatever you want to a woman. She matters. Her well-being matters. Her life matters, and she, too, will be protected by the tenets and sanctions of the law -- life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

"Eye for an eye." That was the law, the commandment, the old commandment. But Jesus gave his followers -- Jesus gives us -- a new commandment: "Love one another." "As I have loved you," Jesus said, "so you must love one another." And how has Jesus loved us?

The old commandment said: Do not take. Do not take what is not yours to take. But the new commandment says: Give. Give what is yours to give.

But the measure for the giving is the same: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Only now it is not that what you take will be taken from you, but that what you give, you freely give in love: your tooth for one who lacks a tooth, your eye for one who lacks an eye, your life for one whose life is being lost. Isn't this precisely what Jesus did?

There is a line from the Iona Abbey morning service liturgy that we will be saying together at the end of our service today: "We will not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing." This is what love is, this is what Jesus' love is: not offering what we can spare out of pity, but offering what we cannot spare for the sake of the well-being of another, purely for the sake of the joy of another.

"Now God's glory is revealed through him." How? How was God's glory revealed through Jesus? In this: in Jesus' gift of his own life in love for you and for me and for all humanity. This is God's ultimate glory: not the glory of God's limitless power or even the glory of God's unmatched goodness, but the glory of God's astonishing grace, of God's love, for all of us, that will not be denied, no matter what, whatever the cost.

And this is how everyone will know that we are Jesus' followers, this is how they will see the glory of God revealed through us: not because we can prove to them how good we are, how faithful we are, how pure we are, but because we love them, because they see that we are ready to make an offering for their sake that does cost us something.