

"Let Your Love Rain Down"

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First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 130 NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – MATTHEW 5:38-48

To the Guy Who Tried to Mug Me in Downtown Savannah night before last.

Date: May, 27, 2009, 1:43 a.m. EST., a "Craigslist personals" posting:

"I was the guy wearing the black Burberry jacket that you demanded that I hand over, shortly after you pulled the knife on me and my girlfriend, threatening our lives. You also asked for my girlfriend's purse and earrings. I can only hope that you somehow come across this rather important message.

First, I'd like to apologize for your embarrassment; I didn't expect you to actually soil your pants when I drew my pistol after you took my jacket. The evening was not that cold, and I was wearing the jacket for a reason. My girlfriend had just bought me that Kimber Model 1911 .45 A CP pistol for my birthday, and we had picked up a shoulder holster for it that very evening. Obviously you agree that it is a very intimidating weapon when pointed at your head ... isn't it! I know it probably wasn't fun walking back to wherever you'd come from ... I'm sure it was even worse walking barefooted since I made you leave your shoes, cell phone and wallet with me. (That prevented you from calling or running to your buddies to come help mug us again.)

After I called your mother, or "Momma" as you had her listed in your cell, I explained the entire episode of what you'd done. Then I went and filled up my gas tank as well as four other people's in the gas station on your credit card. The guy with the big motor home took 150 gallons and was extremely grateful! I gave your shoes to a homeless guy outside Vinnie Van Go Go's, along with all the cash in your wallet. (That made his day!) I then threw your wallet into the big pink "pimp mobile" that was parked at the curb ... after I broke the windshield and side window and keyed the entire driver's side of the car. ... [On your cell phone] I managed to get in two threatening phone calls to the DA's office and one to the FBI, while mentioning President Obama as my possible target. The FBI guy seemed really intense, and we had a nice long chat (I guess while he traced your number, etc.).

... I feel this type of retribution is a far more appropriate punishment for your threatened crime. I wish you well as you try to sort through some of these rather immediate pressing issues, and can only hope that you have the opportunity to reflect upon, and perhaps reconsider, the career path you've chosen to pursue in life.

Remember, next time you might not be so lucky. Have a good day!

Thoughtfully yours, Alex.

OK, we had a lot of fun with that one. But at the heart of that Craigslist personal lay two very different things: the attempted mugging, and the victim's retribution. Are either of these actions in line with the gospel?

As we heard today, the gospel teaches against this type of retribution. And while I doubt anyone would argue against the victim's right to defend himself against this "attempted mugging," what about the retribution? What about Alex's glee over the man's embarrassment, his call to the man's Momma, the illegal use of the man's credit card, theft of his shoes and money, vandalism of the "pimp mobile" designed to implicate the mugger, and the phone calls to federal authorities threatening the life of President Obama? These are the actions that Alex took in response to being mugged, actions that he argues are a "far more appropriate punishment for (the) threatened crime?"

Jesus says, "Do not resist an evildoer ... If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to ... take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile." Being forced to "go one mile" was a specific term for Roman soldier's practice of commandeering civilian labor in an occupied country.

Commentator R.T. France tells us that the first-century Jews Jesus was speaking to fiercely resented being subjected to forced labor by Roman soldiers, just as much as we might resent a slap in the face or someone taking our coat. "Jesus' choice of this example deliberately dissociates him from militant nationalists," explains France. "Rather than resisting or even resenting, (the Roman soldiers in their homeland) the disciples should volunteer for a further mile."

How can we find it within ourselves to respond to such attacks with no resistance or even resentment? How can we live out such a radical gospel of love? "You have heard that it was said," says Jesus, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus is telling us to love the unlovable. Through that type of love, says Jesus, we gain the power to overcome evil – not with 'an eye for an eye,' 'tooth: for a tooth' way of thinking, which the world still bombards us with day in and day out – but rather with love in the face of hate, peace in response to war.

Who are the "unlovable" among us? Certainly muggers, like the one Alex faced down by threat of force and then tormented through personal retribution. But also schoolyard bullies – (Missouri lawmakers held a news conference on Monday calling for efforts to combat bullying).

I grew up the youngest of three brothers and the fattest kid in school, so I was bullied quite a bit, including by my brothers' friends. One of their friends was "Earl the Pearl", a tall, lanky, (pretty-boy type.) I used to chase him around the yard just hoping to get my hands on him. (Did I mention I was big and he was skinny?) Dodging my every advance

he would laugh all the harder as my hurt and anger grew. I never caught Earl, and I've never totally gotten over the hurt and anger, though I've learned to deal with it more productively. Still, if I had I practice Jesus' teaching to love the unlovable, I'd be a freer man today – free of that resentment and hurt which still comes to mind to this day.

Another unlovable among us: Radical Islamists like the Taliban. “I thought long and I thought hard on whether to deliver this sermon...,” said Rabbi Shlomo Lewis of Atlanta on the First Day of Rosh Hashanah 2010. “We are at war,” he said to the congregation. “We are at war with an enemy as savage, as voracious, as heartless as the Nazis but one wouldn't know it from our behavior ... Guilt absolutely falls upon those who committed the (Nazi) atrocities, but responsibility and guilt falls upon those who did nothing as well,” said Lewis, referring to the people of Germany of that time.

Today, he continued, “we are at war ... yet too many stubbornly and foolishly don't put the pieces together and refuse to identify the evil doers ... Let me mince no words,” said Lewis, “... the murderers, the barbarians are radical Islamists ... Make no mistake; we are under attack – our values, our tolerance, our freedom, our virtue, our land.

I have no pathology of hate,” he said, “... but what I do have is hatred for those who hate, intolerance for those who are intolerant, and a guiltless, unstoppable obsession to see evil eradicated. Today the enemy is Radical Islam ...” The enemy is Radical Islam. No doubt. And what should we do in response to such an enemy? Rabbi Lewis' response is to preach hate and to rally the masses for war. Contrast that with the response of Abraham Lincoln when criticized by an associate for his attitude toward political enemies. The associate asked, “Why do you always make friends of them? You should destroy them!” Lincoln replied, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?” And isn't it just that type of political rivalry and warfare that Americans today are fed up with?

In Jesus' day, the enemy was Rome, which at times was no less oppressive and brutal than Nazi Germany or Radical Islam. And still Jesus' response was to preach love. Not tolerance, but love. And not love for love's sake, but rather love for heaven's sake. The type of love that President Lincoln used to destroy his enemies by making them his friends.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” says Jesus, “*so that* you may be children of your Father in heaven.” We are to love our enemies and refrain from retaliation, not tolerantly, but militantly. Love is the Christian weapon of choice. Faced with evil, we are to strike back with love, which is the heaviest weapon we could ever pick up, and yet ultimately the most effective. The ease with which we wield that weapon is in direct proportion to our spiritual fitness. That's why as a boy, I remained a victim of the teasing – most children – and adults, me included, need help with their spiritual fitness. But when we find a way to use love against evil, that's when we know we are marching in step with God in heaven.

Knowing that God is in heaven, God is in charge, when we act contrary to God's word so plainly expressed, we take ourselves out of the fight, we become, as did Alex, something like a thief and tormentor, no different than our attackers.

Robert Capon, in his book “The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel Against the Wisdom of the World,” says, “The church is not in the world to teach sinners to straighten up and fly right. That’s the world’s business; and on the whole it does a fairly competent – even a gleefully aggressive – job of it. The church is supposed to be in the forgiveness business.”

The only way the world “does a fairly competent – even ... gleefully aggressive – job” of combating sin (if by world’s actions sin is truly combated) is through God. If we are not aligned with God in combating sin, then we can be sure that sin will win.

So how do we align with God in the battle against the type of actual evil in the world that Rabbi Lewis points to? Jesus says God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous;” and then he asks, “... If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”

What reward, indeed. The only reward rightly sought by the children of God in heaven is the building up of the Kingdom of God here on earth. When God sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, God is seeking to building up the Kingdom. That’s the only business God is in. As God’s children, *we* are the life-giving, cleansing, and nurturing rain pouring down on evil so that God might turn it to good, drenching the fires of war that God might shine upon the world the light of peace. Through our prayerful words and actions, may it be so. Even those fighting men and women among us in the military are ultimately in the business of building up God’s kingdom.

I’m just finishing the book “Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace Through Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” by Greg Mortenson, author of the #1 bestseller “Three Cups of Tea.” In 2003, Mortenson received the following letter:

“As a captain in the U.S. Army and a veteran of the war in Afghanistan with the Eighty-second Airborne Division, I have had a very unique and up-close perspective on life in the rural portions of Central Asia (an Islamic territory). (Your Central Asia Institute’s) projects provide a good alternative to the education offered in many of the radicalized *mādrassas* from where the Taliban spring forth with their so-called ‘fundamental Islamacism [sic].’

What can be better,” wrote this Army captain from Fayetteville, North Caroline, “than a future world made safe for us all by education?” Add to this the comments of Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff leading the battle on our behalf this very day against Radical Islam.

“We can’t kill our way to victory... The Muslim community is a subtle world we don’t fully – and don’t always – attempt to understand. Only through a shared appreciation of the people’s culture, needs, and hopes for the future can we hope ourselves to supplant the extremist narrative. We cannot capture hearts and minds. We must engage them; we must listen to them, one heart and one mind at a time.”

Or these words, written in 2006 by Col. Christopher Kolenda, commander of 700 U.S. soldiers conducting counterinsurgency operations in partnership with 600 Afghan soldiers.

Dear Central Asia Institute, I am the Commander of Task Force Saber which serves the 190,000 people in northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan Provinces in Afghanistan... I am convinced that the long-term solution to terrorism in general and Afghanistan specifically is education. The conflict here will not be won with bombs but with books and ideas that excite the imagination toward peace, tolerance, and prosperity.”

This is what our fighting men and women are preaching today, words that we could apply in our own lives, in the school yard, the workplace, our homes, our street corners, even our churches. Excite the imagination toward peace, tolerance and prosperity.

No doubt, God *is* using our fighting men and women to combat the evil of Radical Islam. And if you or someone you love is in the military, they are to be honored for their selfless service, to God’s glory. And even if you’re not; if you’re not in the military or you’re not somehow tasked by an organization serving the cause of world peace, God still needs you in the war of good over evil, peace that arises out of war. God needs your love to overcome evil in the world today.

One way some young people decided to respond with love in the face of hate was by raising money for children in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 1994, a group of Wisconsin elementary students began a Pennies for Peace campaign to help Greg Mortenson build schools. The program has since been adopted by Mortenson’s institute and now is in more than 4,500 elementary schools across the United States and abroad.

Like pennies from heaven, God needs you to let your love rain down on the righteous *and* on the unrighteous. Only by refraining from hate speech that says "vengeance is mine", and, instead, seeking ways to radically, even militantly, “turn the other cheek” can we count ourselves among God’s children, doing God’s will, confident in God’s protection and God’s ultimate victory.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Leader: Mighty God, we pray for all those whose lives are governed by fear — of failure, pain, illness, loss and the fears we lay before you now, aloud or silently.

God of mercy,

People: ... hear our prayer.

Leader: Holy God, we pray for all those who seek reconciliation — with a family member, a friend, a coworker and any we name before you now, aloud or silently.

God of hope,

People: ... hear our prayer.

Leader: Loving God, we pray for those ill in body, mind or spirit, especially those we name before you now, aloud or silently.

God of compassion,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Merciful God, we pray for all those living in anger — in naming those things that make us angry before you now, aloud or silently, may the anger be released.

God of grace,

People: hear our prayer.

Leader: Holy God, we lift all the concerns of our hearts and minds, and ask you to renew, strengthen and restore us.

All this we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying ...

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.