

THE MOST DANGEROUS MYTH

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, October 18, 2009
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Resp. Reading 585

Councils

Marge Piercy

We must sit down and reason together.

Perhaps we should sit in the dark. In the dark we could utter our feelings.

In the dark we could propose and describe and suggest.

In the dark we could not see who speaks

and only the words would say what they say.

No one would speak more than twice. No one would speak less than once.

Thus saying what we feel and what we want

What we fear for ourselves and each other into the dark,

Perhaps we could begin to begin to listen.

The women must learn to dare to speak. The men must learn to bother to listen.

The women must learn to say I think this is so.

The men must learn to stop dancing solos on the ceiling.

After each speaks, she or he will say a ritual phrase:

It is not I who speaks but the wind. Wind blows through me.

Long after me, it is the wind.

Reading [John]

from the *Sermon on the Mount*

Matthew 5:38-9, 43-46

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

But I say to you . . . If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

So that you may be child of the One who is in heaven;

Who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good,

and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

Reading [Molly]

from *Payback:
Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*

Margaret Atwood

Christ is called the Redeemer, a term derived from the language of debt and pawning or pledging . . . In fact, the whole theology of Christianity rests on the notion of spiritual debts and what must be done to repay them, and how you might get out of paying by having someone else pay instead.

Offertory Sentences

Judith Meyer

[JB] And finally, from the poetry of New Englander Anne Sexton, who wrote:

[MH]*Look to your heart*

That flutters in and out like a moth,

God is not indifferent to your need.

You have a thousand prayers but God has one.

[JB] Dear God, we give thanks for those moments when we can feel that we live in a world that is not indifferent to our need.

We all have so many needs – a thousand prayers – a thousand needs –

That really only need one answer: Let the world not be indifferent.

And may we live and be with each other in the way that shows this truth, whatever the day brings: that neither are we indifferent to each other.

Your offering for the continued works and ministries of this congregation may now be given and received.

Offertory

*Prelude for Piano II
Andante con Moto e Poco Rubato*

George Gershwin

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It was the morning that President Obama was awakened with the news that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I had been perusing the paper, as usual. One story stuck with me. It was about a teenager in the inner city. He had been arrested for knifing another youth at a bus stop. “Why?” he was asked. He gave a one word answer: “Payback.”

That word stayed with me as I mulled all the other stories I had been reading. Some were about politicians using over-the-top language to get back at the other party. Others were about the financial crisis and the government’s so-called “bailouts.” Still more were about ongoing conflicts: in Iraq, the increasingly complex questions posed by the many-sided factional fights within Afghanistan, and between Israel and Palestine.

You probably have your own candidate for the dubious honor of today’s most dangerous myth. Which is it? Perhaps the myth that global climate change has nothing to do with human activity? Or the far older, more pervasive myth that treats women as inferior and subordinate to men? Perhaps the one symbolized by a terrible slogan I saw the other day, “Hetero is bettero.”

I was musing that these are all myths that we try to counter in our religious community, when I left to drive into Cambridge, headed for Harvard Divinity School, where I teach each Friday. First I had to stop at the offices of UUSC in Central Square, however, our international human rights organization, where I serve on the board. When “BANG!” Just as I approached the Square, a car on my left sailed through a stop sign and plowed into my car. “Oh, NO!” I yelled. Among other things, best not repeated. I wasn’t hurt. Nor was anyone else.

“I’m so SORRY!” the other driver said immediately. “It was my fault! I take full responsibility. I’m from a small town. I’m not used to city driving.” It was a young man, just out of his teens. He was shaking like a leaf.

“Calm down,” I said. “I’m a minister. That not only means I’m in the forgiveness business, but I believe in trying to cut down anxiety.” A Cambridge cop helped us get the cars out of traffic. Then we exchanged insurance information. Both cars were still safe to drive; mine just barely. But I got to the Div School on time, and, in the chapel service, as one of the students preached her way through her emotional and spiritual reaction to the suicide of a close friend, someone who thought he could never live up to his parents’ and the world’s expectations of him, the word came back to me: *Payback*.

I knew that I would be reimbursed for my repairs, even for my rental car, by the other driver’s insurance company. He would probably suffer higher rates. But at least I hadn’t been angry. Expect for a passing moment. And I hadn’t acted on that anger.

The story in the paper that morning had reminded me of a book I once read: *All God’s Children*, by Fox Butterfield. It’s the story of Willie Bosket, an African American teenager in New York, who at the age of 15 shot and killed a man on a subway in the course of an attempted robbery. Eight days later, in the midst of another robbery, he killed another man. Both were Hispanic. When asked why, he said, “They dissed me.”

Because of his age, Willie went to family court and was given five years in juvenile custody. People were outraged. The New York legislature reacted. It passed the so-called Bosket Law, allowing youth as young as 13 to be tried as adults. That not only started a national trend in law. Willie himself, despite a high IQ, decided to make a legend of himself. At 21, he did it again: assault and robbery. Convicted as a “habitual offender,” he made himself one even in prison. Even today Willie’s held in solitary, and treated as the violent legend he’s now made of his life. A complete contrast to another Willie I know – a man I visit in prison -- who has responded to a chance to get an education, and to turn his life around, by doing just that.

At a recent meeting of the UUSC board, the artist Robert Chetterly exhibited some portraits from his series, "Americans Who Tell the Truth." He started it when he was disgusted by all the lies that led the US into invading Iraq, which played on the post-9/11 public appetite for "payback," without much discriminating about which Muslims were true enemies. Each portrait carries a courageous quote. One that stuck with me this from James Bell, a youth worker who advocates for juvenile justice reform.

"We live in a country that is addicted to incarceration as a tool for social control. As it stands now justice systems are extremely expensive, do not rehabilitate but in fact make the people that experience them worse and have no evidence based correlatives to reducing crime. Yet with that track record they continue to thrive, prosper and are seen as an appropriate response to children in trouble with the law. Only an addict would see that as an okay result."

Bell lives in California, where a bankrupt state now spends more on its prisons than on colleges. Recently I learned that the guards in those prisons, through their union, spend millions funding organization supposedly made up of crime victims, and lobbying for mandatory penalties, more incarceration. Some call it "the prison industrial complex." It feeds on "the myth of payback." Retribution as justice. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," said Dr. King, paraphrasing Jesus and Gandhi, "and soon we shall all be eyeless and toothless." It's not a matter of ignoring wrong-doing, but of how we respond. Think of Nelson Mandela, another spiritual exemplar for whom we have named a room in our education facilities. Or talk to our own member, Dr. Geb Blom, who has devoted his life, as a child psychiatrist, to helping young people who have suffered trauma and violence themselves, learn not to visit the sins of one generation on the next.

And isn't that, in a sense, what our collective calling is, as a people of faith? You know, rabbis long ago examined the ancient myth of Cain murdering his brother Abel and noticed that God does not impose the death penalty on Cain. He tempers justice with mercy. Cain is deprived of human fellowship for a time, and made a wanderer and a fugitive, but God also puts a mark on him, to warn everyone not to harm him. "Vengeance is mine," sayeth the Lord, "I will repay."

I think the Nobel Committee gave President Obama the Peace Prize not for what he has done so much as to remind him of the great opportunity he has to be a peacemaker. You know, it is not always weakness to back off from a fight – say, in Iraq, or Afghanistan. Especially when there are probably less than a hundred al Qaeda operatives in the latter country, and most of the so-called insurgents are just angry at the corrupt government we are propping up, and the presence of foreign troops. It's as true in foreign affairs and is can be on the school ground. As a prayer in our hymnal puts it, "Save us from weak resignation to violence; teach us that restraint is the highest expression of power, that thoughtful and mercy are the mark of the strong."

In her book, *Payback*, written before the global financial collapse, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, prophetically suggested that one consequence of the spread of capitalism has been both a tendency worldwide to see everything in payback terms, and a tendency for even religion itself to be interpreted in those terms: as the ultimate spiritual corruption, and most dangerous myth.

This is so basic that I worry that I even have to say it: but getting unhooked from the payback myth is something that everyone of us has to do, every day, with our friends, our co-workers, spouses, children. Tell me true: how often have you this week said to yourself: I'll get 'em back! I know: in some ways, it's human nature. But it also bears watching. And transcending.

Tomorrow night we will play host here at First Parish to a group of witnesses for another way. Six Peace Walkers, who started out from their homes in Connecticut earlier this autumn, have been criss-crossing New England, joined by other peace pilgrims for portions of their travels. You are invited to join us for potluck supper with them at 6 pm, followed by prayers like the one I quoted, some songs, and dialogue about working for justice and peace in a payback world.

Sometimes that our world is even more spiritually than financially bankrupt, seeing everything only in payback terms. One reason that I am glad that the Youth Group could join us for worship this morning is that I don't think any young person should be saddled with the impression that their job in life is to pay back the previous generation, by living up to someone else's expectations. Rather isn't it a matter of learning to "pay it forward," as the phrase goes? To respond to all the blessings we enjoy, especially in comparison to so many others on this planet,

by giving something of our lives and our substance to the global struggle for human rights; which means to the kind of blend of mercy with justice that alone can make for enduring peace?

As a Jewish prayer puts it, “Grant us the ability to find joy and strength, not in the strident call to arms, but in stretching out our arms, to grasp our fellow creatures in the striving for justice and truth.”

So may it be. Amen.

*Hymn 162

Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield

Spiritual

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace
Have courage
Hold on to what is good
Return to no person evil for evil
Strengthen the faint-hearted
Support the weak
Help the suffering
Honor all beings. *-First Parish Benediction*