

Holy mackerel! Last week I began my communion meditation by discussing the old TV show, “This Was the Week That Was”; I should have saved it for today, but, oh well.

For those of you who do not know me, I would like to explain something: When I mention that I am a lawyer, it is not bragging, it is a form of confession. I am, in the words of my colleagues on the Committee on Ministry, a “recovering lawyer”; whether I am also a “repentant lawyer” is open to question, but God is, after all, merciful.

I may only need to admit that “I’m a lawyer for another year; every two years I am required to do thirty hours of continuing legal education, which is time consuming and not very exciting. Since my bar membership is in Illinois, it really does me no good to maintain it; Arizona would not admit me to the bar here unless I had been practicing the past five years, which I have not.

Still, my mind has been permanently warped by having studied law, and while I hope none of you takes to heart the joke, “What do you call a dead lawyer” — “Civic improvement,” I hope also that sometimes it helps me to frame some things for our consideration, whether in sermons or elsewhere.

Prior to the Supreme Court’s decision that marriage is a civil right and must be granted by states to both opposite gender and same gender couples, I had a different focus for today based upon two of this past week’s news items involving the law — in these specific cases, *criminal law*, — both of which deal with how we as would-be followers of Jesus deal with real world events and people. While I do want to comment upon the Supreme Court case — the Stated Clerk of the PCUSA did so, so why not I? — my comments will be pastoral, and in that vein, I still want to focus on these other two items.

They are the inspirational display of faith on the part of actual family members of innocent victims of the horrible shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, which I touched upon last Sunday, and the confrontation between families of his victims and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev at his formal sentencing — to death — for his part in the Boston Marathon Massacre two years ago.

Which is not meant to judge any of those victims’ relatives. All suffered losses that represent the opposite of justice, for which . . .

Well, let me back up, and I may have told this one or more times in the past. I have a tremendous sense of fairness, of what I would consider *justice*, and one place that I expect fairness is when driving. When driving, our safety depends in no small measure on everyone’s being considerate not just for the rights but also for the safety of all other drivers. Which means, does it not, that I have the right to yell behind my closed windows at all of those other drivers out there whom I see as being unfair? No one sees or hears me.

Hmm. When someone asked my wife, Patricia, if I do anything that upsets her, her first answer was, "Yes. He yells at other drivers and it brings back unhappy memories from my childhood." Ouch! And as this other person said to me, "But you are a minister; is yelling at another driver appropriate behavior for a man of God?" Ouch and double ouch.

More than one person has offered the idea that our morality, ethical behavior, is how we behave when we think no one is watching, and I will modify that by adding, "when we don't have time to think first." A daily e-mail newsletter of a church in Chicago sent to me by a snowbird in my congregation referred to the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant who said more or less that even a good act is only a *moral* act when it is done to be moral, which to me means, "when it is thought about in advance." I disagree; if our Christianity penetrates deeply into that part of our subconscious that leads to action when there is not time for an ethical analysis, we can behave morally whether we take time to think about our motives or not.

For we do not always have time to think about what is moral, because life is lived on a tight-wire, high above the ground. If something disturbs that high wire, we do not have time to think, we have to *re-act*. And the question we Christians need to ask of ourselves is, how do we re-act, or rather, how do we condition ourselves to re-act in a Christian manner when our high-wire is disturbed, because, frequently, there is no net to catch us when we err.

And it is the behavior of family members of victims involved in the two acts of terror to which I want to draw our attention. According to most demographers, Massachusetts is not a particularly religious state, so let us keep that in mind when we note that most of those who confronted Dzhokhar Tsarnaev were angry and largely seeking what sociologists and psychologists and lawyers call *retribution*. It is a human norm, certainly preceding in history the idea of "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," which when I was in 10th grade we learned was from the Code of Hammurabi, about 1754 BC, a statement which appears centuries later in the Book of Exodus.<sup>1</sup> But "an eye for an eye" was not really a call for retribution — not a call for revenge — it actually introduced the idea of punishment in proportion to the crime — and that was reflected in the Hebrew law.

The desire for retribution, for revenge, even shows up in some of the Psalms; it is a human reflex. I mention this because the reactions of the Boston Marathon bombing victims' families were completely human in wanting retribution against Tsarnaev, completely human . . . and in direct contrast to those of the victims' families' members in the Emanuel AME killings.

The latter, as I said last week, were models for us all and probably did substantial good for the image and understanding of Christianity when the secular media could not avoid reporting on their forgiveness and their complete lack of calls for *retribution*.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of 21-23, but note especially 21:23-25 though the context may be odd.

And I think with the tight wires of their lives so completely shaken by the deaths they experienced, what kept them from falling off was that their faith had penetrated into their very beings; had become engraved in their subconscious, on their souls! Their Christian faith was not just a matter of what they professed on Sunday; it was part of their *being* so that their actions were those of, well, of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, of God — as we shall see in a few weeks — with a David caught in adultery and murder.

Our Gospel reading today is not about Jesus! It is about *faith* in Jesus. I admit to being always uncomfortable with *miracle* stories, fearing that they create expectations of miracles; if miracles happened whenever we prayed, they would not, after all, be miracles. But the miracle stories *always teach us something*, and in this case, they do teach us about people with faith in Jesus.

But faith is about more than expecting good things to happen; *faith conditions us, strengthens us*, for walking the tight wire of life and not simply re-acting but acting as our faith has taught us to act *as would Jesus himself* when the time for action comes.

And our Christian kin at Emanuel AME Church undoubtedly learned that *retribution* is not the right behavior of the people of God. In Romans, Paul writes:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (*Romans 12:17-21 [NRSV]*)

And Paul is simply picking up on an idea that appears in Deuteronomy, “Vengeance is mine, and recompense,”<sup>2</sup> speaking of the people of Israel.

“Now wait, Mr. — you cannot possibly claim to be a ‘Reverend,’ you heretic — Johnson; you say that in Exodus there are specific words, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ and some Psalms vigorously call for revenge, yet in Deuteronomy and in the New Testament we read something different. Are you trying to say that there is conflict between passages in the Bible?”

You got it! And I think the way we are to interpret them is shown by progress made *by people of faith* in understanding over the centuries — the passage in Exodus is probably 300-400 years older than that in Deuteronomy,— and, of course, with Jesus we get flesh on the bones of what God’s love for humans

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 32:35 (NRSV)

truly is, and of what "Love your neighbor" means. And if we really want to be followers of Jesus, writing those concepts, writing those concepts into our subconscious is what having faith in him really means.

And those concepts Jesus taught should rise to our conscious minds as well when we, as people of faith, look with differing perspectives on what I suspect was the most profound, even if not completely surprising, though legally and logically unsatisfying, decision of the Supreme Court on same sex marriage. The opposition of Christians who are against tolerating let alone endorsing same sex sex is based upon two brief passages in the Book of Leviticus, written perhaps 100 years later than Deuteronomy but 600 years before Jesus, passages never entering into his teaching as handed down to us, and entering into the New Testament only in two passages, one a laundry list, by Paul, and in a similar laundry list by a follower of Paul. In those lists, it is no worse than drunkenness. I strongly suspect that Jesus would advise love toward those who cannot hold their drink, wouldn't you?

I guess what I am trying to say is this: We Christians need to have faith held sufficiently deeply that it conditions us to reject reactions such as wanting retribution and revenge, and to react *reflexively* with mercy and forgiveness and, yes, love, to our fellow human beings, even when we are wronged. It is not that punishment for criminals and civil damage for losses suffered have no place in the world in which Christians live, I need to make that clear, but retribution as such, revenge as such, those are a different matter, for mercy is for all to grant, vengeance is for God alone.

Christianity cannot be snuffed out whether by murderers like the young man in Charleston nor the Boston Marathon Bomber nor by judges or politicians, but it can be hurt by teachers of the faith whose own faith does not grasp what Paul was telling us throughout Romans, and what Jesus tells us repeatedly: *we are all sinners!* If their high wire is disturbed, they might fall off because they have inadequate reflexes, and their net is not well enough constructed to prevent a hard landing.

If our faith is strong, we do not need a net; we will react as Christ would want us to act toward all of God's children, tea-totalers and drunkards, Jews and Muslims and Christians and agnostics, straights and gays, with the love God has shown us, and we shall settle for punishment and damages, not seek revenge or retribution, showing to others always the mercy and love God has shown us through Jesus Christ.

And we need always remember these words of a psalmist :

<sup>3</sup>If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup>But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.<sup>3</sup>

May our faiths, yours and mine, be sufficiently written into us so that we can keep balance on the high wires of life.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 130:3-4 (NRSV)

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And in Jesus' name, Amen.