

## LENT FOUR, YEAR B, MARCH 10, 2024

What is it about revenge and retribution that is so attractive to us? Why do we believe that if we've been wronged all bets are off and we have a right to get even? Is it because we still believe in a vengeful God that is going to strike us down if we don't tow the line so that gives us the right to revenge any wrongs done to us? Or is it because we believe God isn't going to rain judgment down on our enemies so we have to strike first?

The Old Testament is filled with stories about a supposedly vengeful God and today's reading from Numbers is no exception. The Hebrew people have been liberated from the Egyptians for quite some time and are still wandering in the wilderness in search of the land which has been promised. The longer they wander, the crankier they become. They take aim at God and Moses alike very petulantly.

There's a pattern that they follow. They start complaining about everything from food, to not enough water, they're tired, sick of camping out and want to go back to Egypt. There's a level of absurdity in their whining. They moan in one breath, "There is no food and water," and then a second later, "we detest this miserable food." Picture a minivan filled with disgruntled toddlers kicking the seats, throwing food, and screaming, "Are we there yet?" and you have a picture of the Hebrews!

Each episode follows a predictable pattern: the Hebrew people complain, God supposedly gets angry, the Hebrew people realize they've made God angry and beg Moses to intercede on their behalf, Moses does, and God calms down. Then, a few chapters later, another tantrum erupts, and the same pattern unfolds. Wash, rinse, repeat.

When you look at these stories you realize that it's easy to complain, it's easy to blame others for what's wrong, it's easy to lay guilt at the feet of others for everything in your life that's not going right, it's easy to condemn others for what you think is wrong with the world, it's easy to blame God, and when you add it all up it's easy to want revenge for all the wrongs you perceive has happened to you. You see, it's easy to look at everything else but yourself and your own prejudices, inaction, complacency and inability to recognize one's own faults.

There's a story about a man who called his mother in Florida. He asked how she was doing. "Not so good. I've been very weak." "Why are you so weak, mom?" he asked. "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days." "Mom, why haven't you eaten in 38 days?" And the mother replied, "Because I didn't want my mouth filled with food when you got around to calling me and it only took you 38 days."

As funny as this is we realize that we not only receive this kind of guilt and condemnation but we also give it. Sometimes we just can't help but criticize others. It's almost second nature to us. In many cases we thrive on it. One minister said that he did a survey of what people wanted to hear him preach about. The three top topics were sin, judgment, and hell. Why is that? Why do we want to hear those things more than God's grace and love and forgiveness? Why, because it's easier to point out the faults of others and be preoccupied with other people's sin. It makes us feel better to point our fingers at others and say I'm not like that! We all like to believe that we are morally superior or that we can tick off all the reasons why everyone else is going to hell and not us. I'm sure you've all heard the joke about the person who gets to heaven and

his stunned into speechlessness when he sees his neighbor who he was positive would be in hell not in heaven. And let's face it, the reason why we fall prey to judging and condemning is because it's a lot harder to love and forgive. We don't want to hear that the person we despise most is loved by God.

Of all the four Gospel writers John was the least literal among them. All of the Gospel writers take great liberty with the actual events of Jesus life and the things he said. They were not historians. They were seeking to communicate a faith. But, John is the one who exercises the greatest freedom in telling the story of Jesus in order to communicate who Jesus is for us today. John would be aghast at turning his Gospel into a sterile and literal interpretation of the things Jesus said and did.

However, if the life and example of Jesus gives us reason at all to be literal in our reading of Jesus words it would not be John 3:16, but rather John 3:17 "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." This is an amazing verse, a wonderful verse that is full of good news for us. It tells us that the purpose of God is not condemnation. Contrary to the way God is sometimes portrayed, condemnation is not God's line of work.

Rather than creating a belief system that saves some and rejects others, John is simply expressing the depth of God's love, which can be encountered in the presence of Jesus. He is asking the questions, How do we grow in faith, how do we grow in our encounter with this God who so loves the world?

Jesus said to his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And then Jesus did just that, laying down his life for all of us--not only his friends, but those who would despise and reject him. My question is, was that the act of someone bent on condemnation? Was that the act of a person filled with judgment? No!

God's motive and purpose and desire is not judgment. God's son was not sent into the world to condemn the world. God relates to us through love. Pure love. And we can choose to refuse God's love. We can choose to reject God's gift of grace. And even when we refuse, God still loves us. That's the part that we don't get. That's the part that not only drives us crazy, it infuriates us. But that's what unconditional love is all about.

As Christians, we are called to be a part of God's work in the world. It is a work not of condemning or judging, but of loving. We are to show through love not judgment or condemnation what God is really like. But that is hard work. How many of you have had days when your spouse or child has driven you absolutely crazy and you just can't stand them. Here's the person you love, that you're committed too and you're having difficulty loving them. If we have trouble loving the people we love how can we love the person whose views are totally opposite of yours, whose very presence sets your teeth on edge?

As Christians do we respond in love and compassion, or in hatred and contempt? Are we to look for ways to share Christ's love, or for ways to condemn others? What John was telling his small community of believers is that being a Christian does not give us a license to condemn, but it does give us a reason and a responsibility to love.

This is not to say that we remain silent in the face of injustice. This does not mean we do not share the Christian perspective at work or at school or in the community or in public life. But it means that all we do is done in a spirit of love. It

means that we respect each person, even those with whom we disagree. It means we understand that judgement is not our line of work, but sharing God's love is the work of every Christian.

And so the good news for us, the great and wonderful and marvelous news, is that God's purpose is pure grace and forgiveness. God's motive is love. "For God so loved the world...indeed and all we have to do is to accept God's love for us and God's divine presence in our lives. Today we are called to see what God has done, is doing, and will do for you and me in the cross of Christ. So, let us open our hearts and listen to the promises of our loving God. Amen.