

The End of Vengeance
(for the Forgiveness Project)
Andover Newton Theological School
October 3, 2007

Should humankind seek vengeance? Ought we believe we should pray for vengeance?

The Apostle Paul, writing in Romans 12:19 says: “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath for it is written ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay’ says the Lord.” From a Christian perspective, this seems to answer that question. Case closed. Let us move on. However, what do we do with the various writings in the bible, especially a number of Psalms, that pray God’s vengeance against an enemy. For example: Psalm 58 against a societal enemy:

For the lead player *al-tashcheth*, a David *michtam*.

Do you, O chieftains, indeed speak justice,

In rightness judge humankind?

In your heart you work misdeeds on earth,

Weigh a case with outrage in your hands.

The wicked backslide from the very womb,

the lie-mongers go astray from birth.

They have venom akin to the serpent’s venom,

like the deaf viper that stops up its ears,

so it hears not the soothsayers’ voice

nor the cunning caster of spells.

God, smash their teeth in their mouth.

The jaws of the lions shatter, O LORD.

Let them melt away, like water run off.

Let Him pull back His arrows so they be cut down.

Like a snail that moves in its slime,

A woman's stillbirth that sees not the sun,

before their thorns ripen in bramble,

Still alive and in wrath rushed to ruin.

The just man rejoices when vengeance he sees,

His feet he will bathe in the wicked one's blood.

And a person will say, "Yes, there is fruit for the just.

Yes, there are gods judging the earth."

Or Psalm 137 against a national enemy:

By Babylon's streams,

There we sat, oh we wept,

when we recalled Zion.

On the poplars there

we hung up our lyres.

For there our captors had asked of us

words of song,

and our plunderers – rejoicing:

"Sing us from Zion's songs."

How can we sing a song of the LORD on foreign soil?

Should I forget you, Jerusalem,
 may my right hand wither.
May my tongue cleave to my palate
 if I do not recall you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
 above my chief joy.

Recall, O LORD, the Edomites,
 on the day Jerusalem, saying:
“Raze it, raze it,
 to its foundation!”

Daughter of Babylon the despoiler,
 happy who pays you back in kind,
 for what you did to us.

Happy who seizes and smashes
 Your infants against the rock.

Or Psalms 109 against a personal enemy:

For the lead player, a David psalm.
 God of my praise, do not be silent.
For the wicked’s mouth, the mouth of deceit,
 has opened against me,
 they spoke to me with lying tongue.

And words of hatred swarmed round me –

they battle me for no cause.

In return for my love they accuse me,

Though my prayer is for them.

And they offer me evil in return for good

and hatred in return for my love:

“Appoint a wicked man over him,

let an accuser stand at his right.

When he is judged, let him come out guilty,

And his prayer be an offense.

Let his days be few,

may another man take his post.

May his children wander and beg,

driven out from the ruins of their homes.

May the lender snare all that he has

and may strangers plunder his wealth.

May no one extend to him kindness

And no one pity his orphans.

May his offspring be cut off,

in the next generation his name wiped out.

May the wrong of his fathers be recalled by the LORD

And his mother’s offense not be wiped out.

Let these be ever before the LORD,

That He cut off from the earth their name.

Because he did not remember to do kindness

and pursued the poor and the needy,

the heartsore, to put him to death.

He loved a curse, may it come upon him,

he desired not blessing – may it stay far from him.

He donned curse as his garb –

may it enter his innards like water

And like oil in his bones.

May it be like a garment he wraps round him

And like a belt he girds at all times.

This be the plight of my accusers from the LORD,

and those who speak against my life.

And You, O LORD, Master,

act on my behalf for the sake of Your name,

for Your kindness is good. O save me!

For poor and needy am I,

and my heart is pierced within me.

Like a lengthening shadow I go off,

I am shaken away like the locust.

My knees falter from fasting

and my flesh is stripped of fat.

As for me, I become a reproach to them.

They see me, they shake their heads.

Help me, O LORD, my God

Rescue me as befits Your kindness,

that they may know that Your hand it is,

it is You, O LORD, Who did it.

Let them curse, and You, You will bless.

They will rise and be shamed, and Your servant will rejoice.

Let my accusers don disgrace,

and let them wrap round like a robe their shame.

I highly acclaim the LORD with my mouth,

and in the midst of the many I praise Him,

for He stands at the needy's right hand

To rescue him from his condemners.

In his book, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms teach us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism*, John N. Day, a Presbyterian pastor, argues that these texts ought to still find a place in Christian liturgy because the prayer for vengeance is still appropriate. He writes:

In circumstances of sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression, it has always been appropriate for a believer to utter imprecations against enemies or to appeal for the onslaught of divine vengeance. In certain instances today, appeals to God for his curse or vengeance are fitting. (16)

His reasoning begins with the idea of a just God who will punish wrong -doing, that paradoxically God both loves and hates the sinner. He writes: “Even in the New Testament, the fulness of revelation’s progress, it is sinners – not just sin – who will be destroyed, suffering the eternal torment of hell” (29). He reasons further that the justice of God was revealed in the cross, but injustices against God’s people persist and thus the need to cry out for justice remains. He refers to Revelation 6: 9-10 as an example where saints already in heaven cry out for vengeance. It reads:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the alter the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (The New King James Version)

However, Day avers that prayers for vengeance are only correct when believers recognize that the believer cannot do vengeance, that only God can perform it, and when believers recognize that God’s vengeance is in keeping with God’s covenant with H/er people. Vengeance becomes consistent with God’s justice.

I do not agree with Day that prayers for God’s vengeance are ever appropriate. Even though we believe that there is a holiness to God’s word, that it was given under Divine inspiration, I say the interpretation of the word is also given under Divine inspiration and we ought to ask ourselves: what is God saying to us today? What is God doing in the world today? How does our ethical reasoning and moral acting fulfill God’s purpose today? However, while I do not agree with Day’s thinking that the bloody curses of the Psalms are appropriate prayers for

a world living in fear of terror, I do agree with his thinking regarding the radical love ethic of Jesus. Day writes:

God's judgment is by no means the *motivation* for deeds of love, but judgement does lay the *foundation* upon which the alter of radical love is raised. Christians have the freedom to radically love under the assurance of divine vengeance. (98)

For Day, it is because believers are assured of God's vengeance that we can perform deeds of kindness prescribed by Paul, quoting the Old Testament. I say: it is because believers are assured of God's radical love that we can perform these deeds. Again, Romans 12: 14:

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

Romans 12:17-21 reads:

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all.

Beloved do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written:

“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay” says the Lord.

Therefore

If your enemy is hungry feed him;

If he is thirsty, give him a drink;

For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is another example of the radical love to which Christ calls us. Day however wants to hold onto prayers for vengeance for extreme cases. For him it is fitting to pray vengeance upon “the hardened, deceitful, violent, immoral, and unjust” (115)

I say: do not even think about vengeance. The imprecation of bloody prayers that curse the Other, the very understanding that justice is only violent retribution, or that justice is the terrorism of eternal hell-fire, at the very least is unnecessary and redundant and at the very worst does irreparable soul damage to ourselves and makes the logic of war thinkable.

First, the cry for vengeance is redundant because if God has said that S/he will repay, why do we need to ask God for what God has already given H/er word to perform? We do not need to remind God of H/er covenant or tell God how to fulfill H/er end of the deal. Further, when God reveals H/erself as wisdom, S/he says in Proverbs: “whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; But they who sins against me wrongs their own souls; All those who hate me love death.” (Proverbs 8:35-36) The first person who is wronged by wrong is the individual committing the wrong. It is also important to note that people cause pain out of their own pain. This leads us to consider another aspect of vengeance.

If we are going to think about vengeance at all, let us turn it upside down and inside out. Let us begin by examining the linguistic roots of the English word vengeance. The word vengeance comes from the Latin root *vindicare*. It shares the root with the word vindicate. On the surface these two words seem to represent two entirely different concepts – vengeance indicating extreme, violent, forceful retribution, and vindication indicating justification or proof of innocence. We think about vengeance as a vindication of the violence we perpetrate in the name of justice. However, I want to suggest something else. Let us turn vengeance upside down and inside out and think of vengeance as a vindication of the Other; let us consider the justification of the one against whom we want to take vengeance. Within this inside out, upside down logic, the first question we ought to ask when someone has hurt us is: who hurt you? We

ought to ask: what is going on inside the Other that has caused h/er to sin against wisdom, to wrong h/er own soul, to love and to invite death, to allow h/er pain to spill over onto the world around h/er. And, when hatred seduces us, we ought to make the move that the Psalmist makes in Psalm 139. S/he moves from hatred to self examination.

Why those who hate You, LORD, I hate,

And those against You I despise.

With utter hatred I do hate them,

They become my enemies.

Search me God, and know my heart,

Probe me and know my mind.

And see if a vexing way be in me,

And lead me on the eternal way. (Psalm 139:21 -24)

Let us be clear. I am not advocating a “blame the victim” logic. What I am advocating is the idea of interbeing. We ought to turn vengeance into vindication, our prayers of imprecation into prayers of blessing because the existence of the enemy Other and my own existence are intertwined. It is a mutual being.

Buddhist thinker Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Being Peace* writes:

Interbeing is a new word in English, and I hope it will be accepted. We have talked about the many in the one, and the one containing the many. In one sheet of paper we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. That is the meaning of the word “interbeing.”

We inter/are. (Hanh in Barash 207)

In this thinking, to curse one person is to curse all of creation. It is to curse all of humanity. This is not unlike the concept of Ubuntu in African philosophy and theology as taught by Bishop Desmond Tutu that says we find our humanity in right relationship, that when we breach the justice of the relationship, we diminish our own humanity. French philosopher Jacques Derrida's thinking regarding the concept of differance is more radical still. Within the logic of differance, the one is the Other at a different moment in time and space. This thinking reminds us that we are all capable of love and justice; we are all capable of hatred, fear and injustice. The humbling caution is to know that at one moment we may be the victim, at another moment, we may be the perpetrator. We ought therefore to tread lightly and not automatically assume our own innocence. We ought not assume our innocence is ontological, that it is the immutable state of our own being.

When Jesus teaches us to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves, even when the neighbor is also an enemy, a perpetrator of wrong, within the context of interbeing, ubuntu, and differance, we are the neighbor and our humanity is tied to the justice of our relationship with the one who has wronged us, and this includes the justice of our thoughts and of our prayers. We ought not even think a violent retributive vengeance because that does not liberate us or the world from the prison of hatred. This is the worst that our thoughts of vengeance does. It damages our own souls.

Our imperative is to bless and to curse not. So what are we really asking God when we ask that God bless? We are asking that the love of God will come near to us, to come inside of us and transform us to a more perfect representation of the image and likeness of God. We are asking this for our enemy when we ask God's blessing on the enemy. My experience is that very

often, it is adversity that causes me to look to God, to open myself to the Divine Love that is God. Jesus teaches this when he begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit

For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

Blessed are those who mourn

For they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek

For they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

For they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful

For they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart

For they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

For they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for great is your reward in heaven, for

So they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:3 -12)

Here we see that often before the blessing, there is depression, grief, humiliation, soul hunger and thirst, persecution, and ridicule. They will lie on you and about you. The good news is: the Blessings come. “Weeping my endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30:5) In the end, we are closer to God. When we pray blessings on our enemies, we ask God to pull them closer to H/erself.

This is a call for the end of vengeance. Because vengeance, even the thought of it, even the prayer asking for it, leads us down a dark and dangerous cul -de-sac where we are likely to loose ourselves. In the movie *The Brave One*, Jody Foster plays a radio host in New York City who is viciously beaten while she and her fiancé are walking their dog through Central Park. Her fiance dies from his injuries. Her world of comfort, safety, success, love and bright possibilities is shattered. After the attack, it is difficult for her to leave her apartment. In order to reclaim her life, she buys an illegal hand gun. With the gun, now she is able to walk the streets. She begins to wear a cross that belonged to her fiancé and she becomes a vigilante, willing to shoot and to kill the bad guys. She does murder wearing a cross. She is deeply ambivalent about her new way of being in the world; she wants to confess her crimes to the police, but she does not. She becomes a stranger to herself. She does not take the time to think about or to investigate the structural violence that could be a factor in turning her assailants into vicious, murderous criminals.

We ought not think, pray, wish, condone, allow, or excuse vengeance because the next step is to forget the prohibition of our performing vengeful violence and to become a killer in the name of Jesus. We then allow our government, with its police apparatus , to enforce a structural

violence that we think will keep us safe. The step after that is to give our consent to governments to use the blood and treasure of a nation, in the name of vengeance against evil doers, to invade and occupy nations and to depose rulers, all the while raining down death, destruction, and terror upon an innocent ecology, upon innocent men, women and children who then cry out to God for vengeance. Some of these people will strap on a bomb and become the instruments of the vengeance for which they are praying. The War in Iraq is a tragic example of the horror of a logic of vengeance. Much of the sectarian violence we see in that conflict is a result of thinking that each side must kill as many on the other side as that side has killed. It is an eye for an eye logic. However, such thinking leaves everyone blind.

Just peace theory rejects the notion that an eye for an eye retributive justice is the kind of justice that the world needs at this moment in human history. Just peace theory advocates a restorative justice whose intent is to restore relationship between those who offend and those who have suffered the offense. It takes the ideas of restorative justice practiced at the grass roots in local communities to the national and the international level. Restorative justice requires: 1) identifying the harm done to both the victim and the perpetrator of the wrong; 2) broad involvement by everyone harmed, including extended family and members of the community; and 3) work toward transforming relationships. In my formulation of just peace theory, I identify three categories for a just peace – truth, respect and security.

Restorative justice requires truth-telling on the part of both the victim and the perpetrator. We have to listen to each other's stories. We see this in the idea and practice of truth and reconciliation commissions. If we are to listen to each other's stories, this requires respect, even respect for the one who has done harm. For Christians, our imperative is to go beyond respect to

love for the violent, enemy Other. And last, we recognize that our security is not only a function of police and military forces, but rather, true security is found in a positive peace that comes when people understand each other and want to work together to build just relationships that benefit everyone in a society, especially the least among us. Further, a just peace requires forgiveness, a radical forgiveness that does not forgive and forget, but rather one that forgives and remembers, that recalls the wrongs so that they do not happen again, that remembers the wrong and the pain of it so that victims do not become perpetrators of the same crimes against other. Just peace calls upon us to forgive and remember so that we may continually bless those who have wronged us.

John Day ends his book by reminding us that we are at war. He writes:

The imprecatory psalms are a reminder that war is raging. It is a war of opposing powers, with casualties, traitors and triumphs. The principle weapon of that warfare is the dual edged message of the gospel – a message not of sweet passivity, but of life and death itself. (116)

Day is right. We are at war. But II Corinthians 10 reminds us that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds. The weapons of our warfare is a logic that casts down arguments that obscures the knowledge of God and that blocks the life-giving light of God's Divine, radical Love. The weapons of our warfare is the discipline to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, the anointing of radical Love upon humanity. Further, we may only punish disobedience when our own obedience is fulfilled.

Thus we ought to think the end of vengeance, pray God for the end of vengeance and ask instead in our thinking and in our praying for the forgiveness of God, for the blessing of God, for

the mercy of God, for ourselves and for those who have wronged us. And if we are very still, if we quiet our hearts and minds, we can hear echoing down through time the prayers of an old black deacon praying: “It is once more and again that we come head bent and body bowed, empty vessels before a full fountain, asking you LORD to be mercy. Cause mercy sui ts our case.”

The end of vengeance.

Works Cited

- Alter, Robert. The Book of Psalms: a Translation with Commentary . New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.
- Day, John N. Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach us About Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2005.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Differance." Margins of Philosophy. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 1-27.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. "Being Peace." Approaches to Peace: a Reader in Peace Studies. Ed. David P. Barash. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 204 -209.
- Tutu, Desmond. No Future Without Forgiveness. New York: Doubleday, 2000.