

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 23, 2018.

There are times when you and I feel that we have been wronged. And anger builds up in us to the point that we wish harm to those who have behaved poorly towards us. We're not proud of this reaction. We wish we didn't feel this way. But we do. You do something bad to me. I do something bad to you.

There's a word for this feeling of wanting to get back at someone. That word is retribution.

And sometimes we are so hurt, so angry, that we want God to support us as we strike back. This is especially true if we know we are not strong enough to harm the other person. So, we ask God to act for us. From today's lesson from Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 11:18-20**): "O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tries the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause."

Today's psalm (**Psalm 54**) echoes this desire to have God act for us. "For the arrogant have risen up against me, and the ruthless have sought my life, those who have no regard for God. Render evil to those who spy on me; in your faithfulness, destroy them."

Retribution. An interesting word. It means to re-tribute, to give back, as in "an eye for an eye." It's a negative word.

It's the opposite of contribution, which means joining voluntarily with others to give to a good cause. Our Sunday offering is a contribution. So is what we provide at a potluck supper.

We feel good about contributions. We don't feel good about retributions, but recognize that some learning takes place when retribution is made. That's the spirit of today's Psalm. We're not able to make the "arrogant and foolish" see the error of their ways, but maybe God can. So we pray to God to wake these folks up, using whatever methods God chooses.

Fair enough. But in making this case to God, we need to make sure that we have done what we can to alleviate the tension that exists between ourselves and

others. This caveat is the theme of today's Letter of James (**James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a**). "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."

The author goes on to contrast the "wisdom from on high" – that which comes down from heaven – with the wisdom characterized by "envy and selfish ambition" and "wickedness of every kind."

The passage ends with this directive: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he, the Devil, will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he, God, will draw near to you."

Easier said than done. That's for sure. Sometimes the need for retribution is so clear to us, that the only way we can avoid doing something really harsh, like "an eye for an eye," is to turn the whole matter over to God. From Jeremiah: "But you, O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause."

Now, you might interpret this verse as saying, "I want to watch what you do to them. That'll make me feel better." But will that really help? Will watching what God does to my enemy in retribution solve anything? No. It will only make the enemy more angry and lead to more back and forth.

So, I suggest we take this verse in its most helpful form, namely that God will make the appropriate response.

Trusting God in this way is what Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand (**Mark 9:30-37**). This too was not an easy task. They don't understand when Jesus says, "the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." They don't get it, so he goes on: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all ... and whosoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Well, these words didn't calm the disciples. They were still confused, maybe more now than ever. And that confusion wouldn't fade until Jesus rose from the dead. Putting his finger in the wounds of Jesus following the Resurrection made the difference for Peter. Remember that Peter denied he even knew Jesus. He wasn't buying what Jesus had to say until after the Resurrection.

This is where you and I are when we get frustrated with God. We want retribution. And if we can't get it, if we're not in a position to fight back, for whatever reason, then we want God to do it for us. "It's payback time, God, and you have to do it."

To which God responds, "Excuse me ... I have to do what?" Is this what you're telling me? Is this what you're ordering me to do? Well, let me remind you of something: Vengeance is mine. I will repay. And I'll do it in my own way. You need to trust me on this score. I know you're angry. I know you've been hurt. I know that you feel like "an eye for an eye" is the appropriate response. Believe me, I know what you're feeling. But this is properly my call, not yours. Let me be God. I'm going to take charge anyway. So get used to it. And give your anger a rest. Trust me."

That's the Bottom Line, isn't it? Trust in God to do the right thing. Yes, it's a really tough assignment. And we're not sure where we fit into the whole business. And we're not sure if we will agree in how God responds. But we know in our better moments that "God is my helper, and it is the Lord who sustains my life." Psalm 54, verse 4.

What we also know is that Psalm 54 has a verse 5: "Render evil to those who spy on me; in your faithfulness, destroy them."

What we need to remember right here is that the speaker in this psalm is someone just like you and me, someone so angry that he or she wants God to punish those who hurt the speaker. Retribution. Hard and fast. "Do it God, do it, do it for me." No, God says, "You do this for me. Trust me. Do what you can to make the situation better, but let me handle the most severe punishment. That's my call."

To which we pray, "Grant us, O Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly." Tough assignment? You bet. But we didn't sign up for "easy." We signed up for crucifixion. But – and this is the core of our faith - we also signed up for resurrection.

Contribution rather than retribution. To which, God says, "That's better," and to which we say "Amen."

