

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

‘And he took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what you owe me.’

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Pay me what you owe me

is a demand for justice. And when a wrong has been done, and justice has not been given, what option is there but anger? But rage? But a desire for vengeance?

Who can be held to blame for demanding justice after he has been wronged? ‘Prick us, shall we not bleed? Tickle us, shall we not laugh? Wrong us, shall we not revenge?’ Thus, does the poet writes, so natural does it feel to be indignant when we believe ourselves slighted, to be wroth when we imagine ourselves disrespected.

We are wronged, and we demand our rights.

Most of us are too cowardly to confront our adversary directly. So we turn to others and display our displeasure. We gossip: ‘Did you hear what that man does to his wife? I hear this isn’t a one time thing either, it happens all the time.’ We backbite: ‘I wouldn’t get too friendly with that woman, she puts on a show of friendliness, but it’s fake, it’s all manipulation.’ We revile: ‘How dare he tell me that when I know he is twice as guilty as me of the same thing if I do it at all! That vulture.’

What is it to revile? It is to spit on a man’s reputation when one cannot spit on his face.

What is it to backbite? It is to poison the minds of a man’s friend when one cannot poison the man.

What is it to gossip? It is to assassinate a man’s name when

one cannot assassinate the man.

‘But it cannot be wrong to do these things. After all, that person really did wrong me. Me! I deserve a little respect, just a little. And I will not stop until he apologizes and makes it right. I will not stop until I get the respect I deserve!’ *‘And he took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what you owe me.’*

But these are merely the cowardly ways we in our weakness seek justice when we are wronged. Occasionally we are a little more brave. We demand our rights directly from our rival.

‘How dare you speak to me that way? How dare you spread these dirty stories about me and turn everyone against me? I am a man and I deserve a little dignity.’ Now *pay me what you owe me.*’

‘What kind of husband are you that you would humiliate me in front of all of them? You always do this, you always make me look like a fool. I deserve better in life, and I deserve better from you. Now *pay me what you owe me!*’

‘What kind of parent are you that you always belittle me, you never trust me. I am sick of your infantilizing me and guilting me. You have to accept the way I want to live my life! I deserve my independence, my own space. Now *pay me what you owe me.*’

‘You are the most ungrateful wretched child I have ever seen. Don’t you know everything you have comes from me? Now *pay me what you owe me.*’

‘Do you know who you are talking to? Do you know who I am? I probably make more in a week than you make in a year? I am a respectable person around here, and that’s what I demand from your sorry self, some respect. Now *pay me what you owe me.*’

[This society is unjust. It steals from us, the oppressed, just to support the oppressors, the

elites, the system, the hierarchy. I just want justice. Justice for all, not just the powerful. Now pay me what you owe.]

After all, we all do deserve respect, we deserve dignity.

Really. For we are all made in the image of God, and God's image demands respect. It demands veneration. The anger, the rage you feel when you are wronged has a validity, for the image of God within you was wronged.

So you act on your anger. You do not forgive. You wait for them to apologize and make right.

How good it feels to hate; to claim the veil of righteousness by unveiling the unrighteousness of others; how good it feels to hate; to claim the mantle of virtue by accusing others of viciousness. *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell in unity!* Not at all! 'How good and pleasant it is when the brethren are riven by strife!

How good it feels to hate, for to hate is to judge; how good it feels to hate, to judge, to ascend the seat of judgement and render verdict upon verdict against all those who have done you wrong. Indeed, great is it to sit upon the seat of judgement, for such is the seat of God, and to render judgment, is it not to have become God? To sit upon his seat between the cherubim? To dwell in majesty upon the arc of his law?

But let none touch the arc of the holy things, lest they die.

When you are wronged, the image of God is wronged within you. When you are wronged. God is wronged within you. *Against thee, O Lord, thee only have I sinned.* But when you respond with anger, with spite, with gossip, with bitterness, what is it that you rage against, but the image of God in another? What do you rage against but God in another? *Against thee, O Lord, thee only have I sinned.*

When you refuse to forgive
from the heart have you not refused to forgive the image of God? Have you not taken the image of God *by the throat,*

saying Pay me what you owe me?

Do I speak in abstractions? Do you think I am saying that, when you make demands of others, it is like making demands of God? There is nothing abstract at all. You have made demands of God. You have taken the Almighty by the throat. You have demanded of the Most High payment.

Remember who tells today's parable: The Christ. Remember: *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes upon himself the sin of the world.'*

*Behold, the lamb of
God who takes upon himself the
sins, the wrongs, adulteries, the murders, the slanders, the fornications, the
cruelty, the violence, the hatefulness, the bitterness, the ruthlessness, the
maliciousness, the bloodthirstiness, the covetousness, the pettiness, the
malice of the world.*

It is written: *All
things are his, for he made them.* Now all things are his, because he has
become them.

Jesus is the Son of Man, *who
was made sin for us. 'Behold! Christ, the failed husband. Behold Christ, the
ruinous alcoholic. Behold, Christ the murderer, the
backbiter, the reviler. What is your sin, which eats away your life from the
inside, dear Christian? Behold! Christ,
the sinner of your sin.*

*Behold! The lamb of
God who has now become the incarnation of all human evil, who has taken
into himself every human wrong in such a way that it is as if he had committed
the sins of every man himself.*

Tell me. What shall we do with such a terrible creature as
this? Such a wicked being? *'Deliver him
to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto us.'*

'Give us Barabbas!'

'Crucify him!'

*'Deliver him to the
tormentors, till he should pay all that was due.'*

Who are these tormentors? They are you. It was no Roman soldier or Jewish mob that mutilated the Lord; it was you and me.

You were there, stripping the Lord naked, mocking him, beating him in your indignation, crying out: *'pay me what you owe me.'*

You were there, scourging his back, scattering his blood across the pavement, reproaching him with the words: *'pay me what you owe me.'*

You were there with the hammer, piercing his blessed hands, and raising him up among the ravens and vultures, sneering: *'pay me what you owe me.'*

For even as you have demanded justice and refused forgiveness to the image of God, to *the least of these little one's my brethren*, so you have refused it from the true image and likeness of the Lord of Glory himself. And so, for the sake of our unforgiveness and mercilessness has he undergone every torture and torment,
*this Jesus, who is both Lord and Christ,
whom you crucified.*

Now, you murderer of God, you who have wronged the judge of all, the King of the Universe. *'For the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, who has come to settle his accounts with his servants'* How will you make it right? What will you say?

*'Lord, have patience
with me, and I will pay thee all.'*

Will you no longer backbite or gossip? Speak truthfully from now on. Put the best construction on everything. Say nothing if it be not uplifting and beneficial. The Lord *whom you crucified* will reply: *'All men are liars.'* *'Their mouths are as an open sepulcher, and poison is upon their lips.'*

*'Lord, have patience
with me, and I will pay thee all.'*

Will you amend your ways? Will you do good, be kind, act
virtuously from here on out? Give to the poor, give to the needy, help with
disaster relief, do what you will. The Lord *whom*
you crucified will reply: *'You are an
unclean thing, and your righteous works are as polluted rags before me.'*

*'Lord, have patience
with me, and I will pay thee all.'*

Will you sacrifice? Give whatever you can, make whatever atonement you can
make, suffer to get it right again? Give all your money to the Church, your
time to God's service, your life to His cause. The Lord *whom you crucified* will
reply: *'I
hate your sacrifices, and your whole burnt offerings I will despise.'*

*'Men and brethren,
what then shall we do?'*

What can a man do? Such a wicked man, who owes such a debt
of wrong, far exceeding ten thousand talents? He can do nothing, but be thrown
down before the Lord of Mercy, *'For as
the heaven is so high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that
fear him.*

*As far as the east is
from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.'*

So *'The servant therefore fell down, and worshiped him, saying, Lord, have
patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved
with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.'*

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*Preached by Pastor
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Sermon Texts: Genesis

50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35.