

Years ago, I was a curate at St. Andrew's Church in Zurich, Switzerland. St. Andrew's had a tradition of children's sermons at the front of the church. I would sit on the steps, all the kids would gather around, and I would give a short homily just for them. Often I would ask them questions.

One Sunday I was talking about forgiveness. I don't remember the meat of the sermon at all, but I remember how it ended. I asked the children, "So, what are we going to do the next time somebody hurts our feelings?" Now, of course, I knew the answer. I had just spent several minutes explaining it to them. We were going to forgive them.

One little boy raised his hand. I smiled, put the microphone right up to his face, and in a loud voice, with a very thick British accent, he announced to the entire congregation: "My dad says we should kill them all!" The church erupted in laughter, and the sermon was effectively over.

I have thought about that little boy many times over the years because, without knowing it, he had stumbled onto something rather profound about human beings. Somebody hurts you; you hurt them back. Someone humiliates you; you humiliate them. If they hit you hard, you hit them harder. We learn this lesson on television, at the movies, on the playground. We read about it in the news.

The late theologian Walter Wink called it the myth of redemptive violence. By "myth," Wink didn't mean something untrue. He meant one of those deep stories we tell ourselves about how the world really works. And this particular story is ancient, widespread, and often unquestioned: the belief that ultimately violence can save us—that violence, in whatever form be it verbal, emotional, or physical ...is really the only thing that can put things right and restore

order. We see it in ancient empires and modern nation-states, in action movies and families and, apparently, occasionally in children's sermons. Something goes wrong. Somebody has to pay.

And that is essentially the answer the religious leaders give Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus tells them a terrible story. Servants beaten and thrown out, but "Surely they will respect my son." But They don't. They throw him out of the vineyard and kill him.

And Jesus asks, "What should the landowner do?" The religious leaders know the answer and they say it with certainty: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death." There it is. Make them pay...and pay with their lives.....and as if suffering makes justice sweeter not only will they pay with their death, but it must be a miserable one. And just to be fair: it does make sense....at least it aligns with our expectations. We are told that these people are wicked. They have beaten and murdered people. Surely justice means somebody has to make them pay...and so what if we get perverse pleasure from their demise?

But notice something. Jesus doesn't say, "Exactly." He doesn't say "*YES, that is it!*" Instead, he talks about a rejected stone: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." And this is where Jesus, in his usual way, begins to turn us around, to upend our expectations and challenge us to look at things anew. Because Jesus is telling us a story about a vineyard, and about the pharisees...for sure, but He is also telling a story about himself.

Remember where we are in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has entered Jerusalem like a king. He has overturned tables in the Temple and challenged the religious authorities. And they have asked the question underneath all these parables: "By what authority are you doing these things?" Who are you? Essentially they are asking, if we support you, if we choose to follow you....What kind of king are you going to be?

Now Jesus tells them about a son who is rejected, thrown out, and killed. In a matter of days, that will be Jesus...rejected, killed, thrown aside in a borrowed grave. And so the question becomes: What will this king do with the people who reject him? Will he make them pay? That is what kings do. That is what empires do. That is what we do. What will Jesus do.

Thank God, Jesus refuses to play his assigned part. When Jesus is rejected, he does not become more violent than those who reject him. When he is betrayed, he does not become more hateful than those who betray him. And when he is killed, his answer is not vengeance. His answer is forgiveness.

What kind of king is this? A king whose throne is a cross. A king who, hanging there in agony, prays not for retribution, or even for justice, but for God to forgive the very people committing the atrocity against him. *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.* That is who Jesus is.

Jesus denies the myth of redemptive violence. Turning the other cheek is not servile weakness. Forgiveness is a mighty act of breaking the cycle, of refusing to be drawn into the animosity of others. Jesus is a king whose authority looks remarkably like mercy. As our prayer last week said, God declares his almighty power “chiefly in showing mercy and pity.”

And if we claim to follow this king, then his authority eventually has to shape the way we live. Let love be your authority. Compassion your rule. Forgiveness your law. Let mercy be your guide.

A few years ago, when I was serving as Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, I was called in to help a small church that was dying. There were six members left. They were struggling to maintain the building, keep services going, and pay their bills without robbing the endowment. Deep down, all six knew they needed to close.

But knowing this didn't make it easier. When I arrived, they were arguing, and by arguing I mean fighting... about what would happen next. What should happen to the building? The silver? All the things generations of people had given to that church? We prayed and began talking.

While we were talking, I noticed something hanging on the wall behind one of them. It wasn't beautiful. It was a little cross-stitched sign in a cheap, dollar-store frame. Someone had stitched flowers around the edges, and in the middle, in crooked letters, were the words: "What wisdom is greater than kindness?"

I got up, took it off the wall, and put it in the middle of the table. The words were attributed to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They told me a former member, a high-school English teacher had made it at least 30 years before. They then began arguing about how long ago it was made...I interjected and asked them, "Could this be our guide? Could these words help us decide what to do?" If it has been here for so long, can't it be a part of what you are and what you long to be? They agreed. And something changed in the room.

In the end, those six people gave away the church building and the twelve thousand dollars they still had in the bank. They gave away the silver and the brass. All of it. They gave it to the Salvation Army so the building could become a shelter for women escaping abuse. They could have made any number of decisions. But in the end, they let compassion be their guide. They let love be their rule. They saw that mercy was a form of strength. "What wisdom is greater than kindness?"

This week, all of us will find ourselves in some kind of conflict. It is part of being human. It's normal as can be. And when this conflict comes, somewhere inside us that ancient instinct

may rise again: Make them pay. Of course, most of us aren't going to "kill them all." We have much more respectable ways of making people pay.

We withhold affection. We give someone the silent treatment. We ignore someone while nursing resentment. We leave them out. We become a little colder, a little less generous, our responses a little more terse. We make the sarcastic remark we know will sting. We refuse to call. We refuse to apologize. Or maybe we do nothing at all, but somewhere deep inside, we keep score.

Underneath all of it is the same old logic: You hurt me, so I need you to hurt a little too. That is "make them pay" in its everyday form. And Jesus offers us another way. We don't pretend the hurt didn't happen. We don't say injustice doesn't matter. We don't abandon good boundaries or righteous accountability. We simply refuse to believe that another person's suffering will redeem our own.

When that old instinct rises in us, remember the rejected Son. Remember the strange authority of Jesus. Don't give in to the cheap thrill of retribution. It is a vaporous ecstasy, fleeting almost as soon as we taste it.

Follow instead the path of Christ. Let love be your authority. Because the Christian life finally rests under one great authority: the limitless love and mercy of God. "What wisdom is greater than kindness?" It is a good question. One you can live by.