Law of Talion

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

It seems that there is a brief lull in fighting in the Ukraine but so many people have been killed and injured. The battle rages on in Syria and in hot spots on the African continent. One of the greatest debates for Christianity has been the debate over pacifism.

In its earliest forms the law of talion (an eye for an eye) was intended to set strict limits on the right to revenge: one could not avenge the loss of an eye by violently exacting two eyes from the enemy. By Jesus’ day Jewish law further restricted vengefulness by substituting monetary compensation for the removal of the aggressor’s eye and so the first lawsuit for compensation was born. But as usual Jesus wants to take it one step further: he challenges his followers to renounce their right to retaliation. They are to suffer loss without seeking recourse in the courts. What would that do to the notion of war crimes being punished by the court in the Hague?

It is a truism that truth is the first casualty in war. I suppose that it says something good about us humans that we seem to have enough misgivings about war that, when we go to war, we can’t seem to wage war without falsehood. In order to kill and destroy we must prevaricate about those we are killing, demonize them, falsely present ourselves and our motives for engaging in violence, and so forth.

I was listening to an interview on the CBC the other day on how news has taken over so much of our lives. One man being interviewed was expressing how he thought it was so weird that we could sit down and watch the news at night and hear that 300 people had been killed in a war in the Congo and twenty minutes later we are sound asleep! How could we go to bed knowing that 300 of our fellow human beings had been murdered that day and simply go to sleep as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “It is kind of weird,” he said.
Every war in my memory has always been undertaken for the very best of reasons, usually some abstraction like “peace,” or “freedom,” or “national sovereignty,” or “to defeat communism.” More recently, “security.” But when the war finally drags to a close, then the truth comes out. The President didn’t really get accurate information about North Vietnam. The Americans really didn’t know if there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. So maybe the Afghanistan politicians were conspiring with the Taliban they were supposed to be resisting, and so forth.

I’ve got all this falsehood and violence on my mind this morning because, well, Jesus has put it there with his Sermon on the Mount. As we noted last Sunday, Jesus tells us some tough, demanding truth in his sermon. I pray that, among other reasons for being here today, you have come here hoping to hear the truth because Jesus is not only the “way, and the life” but he is also, been described as “the truth.” Sometimes, I confess, I’m guilty of softening the truth in my sermons, flattering you in ways that are not completely honest. But not Jesus! He tells us the truth.

And as we noted last Sunday Jesus’ truth seems inherently, deeply nonviolent. All of us are against violence – unless it’s violence in the service of self-defense.

Jesus, as he demonstrated in his own life, is against even self-defense! There is not one instance in all of scripture of Jesus ever using violence or commending violence as an appropriate response to anything. More revealing perhaps, there is not one instance in all of scripture of any of Jesus’ later followers using violence or commending violence! Wow.

Like I say, I really hope that you have come to church this morning wanting to hear some truth! Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist, in accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972, connected our lies with our violence: “Violence, less and less embarrassed by the limits imposed by centuries of lawfulness, is brazenly and victoriously striding across the whole world, unconcerned that its infertility has been demonstrated and proved many times in history. What is
more, it is not simply crude power that triumphs abroad, but its exultant justification. The world is being inundated by the brazen conviction that power can do anything, justice nothing . . . “But let us not forget that violence does not live alone . . . it is necessarily interwoven with falsehood. Between them lies the most intimate, the deepest of natural bonds. Violence finds its only refuge in falsehood, falsehood its only support in violence. Any man who has once acclaimed violence as his method must inexorably choose falsehood as his principle. At its birth violence acts openly and even with pride. But no sooner does it become strong . . . than it senses the rarefaction of the air around it and it cannot continue to exist without descending into a fog of lies, clothing them in sweet talk. It does not always, not necessarily, openly throttle the throat; more often it demands from its subjects only an oath of allegiance to falsehood, only complicity in falsehood.”

This connection was undoubtedly one that Solzhenitsyn learned to make from bitter experience. But since he is a Christian, he would also have learned it from Holy Scripture such as our Gospel for today, or perhaps from Psalm 5: “You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful . . . For there is no truth in their mouths; their hearts are destruction; their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues” (Ps 5:6, 9).

Or from St. Paul, “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Ruin and misery are in their paths” (Rom 3:14, 16).

In his famous essay on “Politics and the English Language,” written in 1946, George Orwell was incisive in making the same connection. “In our time, [he wrote] political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely
of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.”

Orwell then gave examples of how political speech becomes a cover for violence:
Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements.

And what about today? What phraseology would we employ?

An invasion is engineered on false pretenses; hundreds of thousands are killed or maimed; homes, hospitals, and mosques are blown up; water, electricity, and other services are cut off; civil society is destroyed; half the population is left without means of livelihood; prisons are filled with people picked up off the streets; detainees are tortured and humiliated; cities are targeted and destroyed, and the insurgency is blamed on outside elements. This is called “bringing democracy to the Near East.”

“Political language,” concluded Orwell, “and with variations this is true of all political parties . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

Well, I guess my point is that all of you have all been called to follow the way of Christ, baptized into the way of Christ. Do you not know that when you were baptized you were baptized into the death of Christ? As a great theologian once said, the death of Christ was the death of death. Do you not know that you have died to death – and to all the things that make for death? Come to the water! Do not choose death but life! And do you not know that when you died to death you died to
falsehood – and to all that falsehood teaches? Do not yield yourself to falsehoods, and do not go along with those who do – even when they hide their falsehoods under a show of piety. Of all bad men, said C.S. Lewis, religious bad men are the worst. Come to the water! And do you not know that when you died to falsehood, you died to brutality and bloodshed? Live in conformity with your baptism into Christ! Choose life, choose truthfulness, choose peace – and the things that make for peace!

Our Lord Jesus preached peace, but “not as the world gives.” Peaceful Jesus was from the first a disturber of the status quo. Alas, too often Jesus’ followers have been on the side of peace at any cost, peace as the world gives in opposition to Jesus.

A remarkable moment in church history occurred in Alabama in the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As you know, Dr. King was discovered in Alabama while he was a Baptist pastor in Montgomery, where the church called him to the ministry of Disturber of the Peace, the “peace” wrought by people like George Wallace and Bull Connor.

In a “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Martin Luther King Jr. justifies why he organized marches and sit-ins that “disturbed the peace.”

“Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are quite right in calling for negotiation . . . Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”

King explains that while he opposes violent tension, he believes there is “a type of constructive, nonviolent tension . . . the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”
The purpose of King’s protests was “to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” The liberal recipients of King’s letter hoped that Birmingham would desegregate without a fight. King eloquently told them they were wrong. (See the account of the lives of the recipients of King’s letter in Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”*)

The peace that King disturbed was no peace, but instead Birmingham’s police state, constructed by powerful people in order to oppress and terrorize black citizens. There would be no transformation without the disruption of truth-telling.

In my experience, churches always hope that it is possible to be faithful to the mandates of Jesus Christ without the pain of disruption and dislocation. We ministers tend to be reconcilers and peacemakers who are uncomfortable with disruptions.

This day let’s remember that Jesus Christ was unable to work our redemption without a disruption of the status quo that eventually led to his crucifixion in a vain attempt to silence him. So let us choose the way of peace as much as is humanly possible for therein lies the way of peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.