

Life In God's Realm

When JP and Lies and I met a couple of weeks ago to talk about the baptism this morning, JP gave me a copy of the baptismal service that was used when he was baptised in 1973 at First United Church, where his grandfather, Jack Shaver was serving. These are some of the questions and responses that Bill and Fran - JP's parents - gave at the time:

- * *Bill and Fran, do you receive this one as committed unto your charge in a unique way, and at the same time, as being in his own charge? Answer: We do*
- * *Do you feel up to performing so solemn a charge as this? Answer: Not all the time.*
- * *Can you see others being of any help? Answer: Yes, we are open to it, and find ourselves waiting for it.*
- * *What then are we celebrating today? Answer: Jean Pierre, and we count on his survival in spite of our performance.*

And when Daegan - JP's sister was baptized in 1970, the statement that was made during her baptism by her parents was similar: *"We hope that our children will survive as persons in spite of our good intentions and bad judgements. We believe that if they do survive, it will be by the grace of God."*

Today, JP and Lies bring Chloe for baptism - along with, I'm sure, the same fear and trembling, hopes and fervent prayers as their parents had for **them**. The fact of the matter is, no matter how much we may love our children, we are not infallible. There is no doubt that JP and Lies will make mistakes - that they will say things and do things that may hurt their children - despite the best of their intentions. It is an awesome responsibility to take on the role of being a parent - to try and safeguard and protect them from all that would harm them physically and emotionally, to instill in them a sense of their own worth and beauty, to teach them responsibility and respect for others, and to nurture the Divine Seed in every heart so that it might blossom into fullness and maturity - as the paraphrase from Psalm 119 so beautifully expresses it. Parenting can be at the same time - the greatest gift imaginable - and the hardest thing we are called upon to do in our lives. Particularly in the midst of a world filled with temptation, danger and violence - we find it hard enough to make our **own** way through it sometimes - let alone try and steer a path for our children.

In the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's gospel that we have been reflecting upon for the last several weeks - Jesus lays out a basic blueprint for what life in God's realm looks like. In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus is speaking particularly of our response when confronted with someone who seeks to hurt or harm us. He begins by quoting the *lex talionis* - the law of retribution: *"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you - if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it No more tit for tat stuff. I am telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst...."*

In our world, we are confronted daily with violence and abuse, in its many forms. From local news coverage of gang violence, to the bullying in schools that we talked about with the children, to the increasingly sanctioned violence we see in sports like hockey, and on TV and in video games - to the conflicts we see around the globe - Jesus' words to us today are very apropos. How **do** we respond as people of faith to those who seek to hurt us physically or emotionally - and what do we teach our children? Jesus' words of wisdom in today's passage are not easy to hear. In a world that is 'all about me' - Jesus offers an alternative that we may find difficult to imagine and embody. If, as he tells us, we give to everyone who begs, we fear that we will end up with nothing left for ourselves.

If we turn the other cheek, chances are it will get slapped as well. If we love our enemies, we may end up being even more persecuted. And if we are too nice, we fear that we risk being seen as weak, a pushover, or a doormat.

This passage has often been misused or misunderstood as somehow recommending mere acquiescence in the face of violence and harm - that is to accept our abuse passively and embrace our assailants. Certainly, the church has often been complicit in the past with victims of domestic violence by quoting this passage. But I don't think that is what Jesus was talking about. He is not condoning violence. He is, however, suggesting that we have a choice. By refusing to retaliate in kind - we break the cycle - we model a different way of being that brings out the best, not the worst in ourselves and others. And we hold open doors for new possibilities to emerge. We have recently seen something of this in what has been happening in Egypt. The protests there were mostly non-violent - and the power of that active, creative non-violent force toppled a regime that had lasted for more than 3 decades.

In her newest book *'The Twelve Steps To A Compassionate Life'*, Karen Armstrong begins by writing about our 'reptilian brain' - the one that is still present underneath the more developed brain. The 'reptilian brain' is responsible for the fight/flight response in animals and the need for revenge and retribution. It is a necessary part of life when danger is near and a quick response is necessary - but it is not attuned to living in societies nor, one might say, for the life of faith. In that sense, Jesus is inviting us to consider embracing a life that is in many ways counter to our very basest instincts for survival. He is outpacing our reptilian brain with a call to the highest and best within us - to raise our sights and join him in creating a more compassionate world - a common community based on respect, generosity and love.

As we celebrate Chloe's baptism in our midst, these words of Jesus offer hope for the world into which she has been born. Eugene Petersen, in his paraphrase of this passage from 'The Message', sums up our prayers for her and all children in our care, that they may "*live out your God-created identity - living generously and graciously toward others, the way that God lives toward you.*" May it be so.