

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Making the World New: A New Blessing
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Genesis 4:1-16; 1 Peter 3:8-12

He had been relieved of duty. Less than 24 hours after the Navy asked its commanders to be honest about the extent of the spread of the coronavirus aboard their ships, Captain Bret Crozier of the USS Theodore Roosevelt was out. He was out because he had sent an email to thirty recipients both in his chain of command and some outside of his chain of command expressing his frustration at the lack of rapid response to the outbreak of the virus aboard his ship. When the email was leaked to the press, the then acting Secretary of the Navy, not only reprimanded him but removed the Captain from his command. I want to pause here for a moment and say that, not having served in the Navy, I don't know if this action was justified or not. That is not my issue. My issue is with what happened next. The Acting Secretary, not content with publicly removing the Captain from his command, flew to Guam, boarded the Roosevelt and proceeded to launch into a profanity laden speech, which led to his statement, that the Captain "was either too naïve or too stupid" to command this ship. What we need to realize is that this Secretary was addressing men and women who loved their Captain; who would have given their lives for their Captain. And this stranger was attacking the Captain's character and ability. It did not sit well with the crew. What I have to say though is that the Secretary's personal attack did not surprise me. And I say that not because of the political climate in which we live, but because that is what we human beings do. We seek and destroy.

We seek and destroy. It seems as if there is some hard-wired element in human beings that when we believe we have been wronged, or someone has something we want, or says something that hurts our feelings, or attacks our reputation that our first inclination is not to ignore the situation, but it is to seek and destroy "the other". My guess is that all of us, if we thought about it for a second or two, could find an example of our own desire to seek and destroy someone in our past or present. And this is not new. It is in fact at the heart of one of the oldest stories in the Bible; the story of Cain and Abel. Cain and Able were brothers, which for those of us with brothers know that brings its own issues. They each brought an offering to God. God accepted Able's offering but not Cain's. Cain was angry about this. We are not sure if he was angry with God, but we know he was angry with Able. Able had something that Cain wanted, the approval of dad, the approval of God. Notice in this simple story, that God knows that Cain is upset and tells him to try again and all will be well. But that is not enough for Cain. Cain is aggrieved. Cain is jealous. Cain wants to seek and destroy. Cain invites his brother on a picnic into the fields and there Able is slain. Being angry is not enough. Seeking and destroying is just what we humans do.

Seeking and destroying is something that Peter's audience would have understood all too well. For, if there was a civilization that took pride in seeking and destroying, it was the Romans. One of my favorite examples of this took place not long before Peter would have been writing, and that was the story of Cleopatra. For those of you unfamiliar with the story, Cleopatra was the pharaoh of Egypt. She and Mark Antony, the co-ruler of Rome shackled up together, had a couple of children and thought they could take over all of the Roman Empire. The other co-ruler, Octavian, had different ideas. This resulted in a civil war in which Antony and Cleopatra were defeated. Antony took his own life, but Cleopatra thought she could strike a deal with Octavian and win in the end. What she discovered however was that Octavian had other plans. Her defeat would not be enough for him. Instead, Octavian planned to take her in chains to Rome and parade her through the streets so people could throw rotten fruit and vegetables at her and

insult her along the route. Then she would be publicly executed, perhaps by crucifixion. It was only then that Cleopatra made a date with an asp. Octavian was on a seek and destroy mission. This is what Rome did. And everyone knew it.

It must have come as quite a shock to Peter's audience when they got to this part of the letter. When Peter wrote these words. "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called-that you might inherit a blessing." Peter is not only asking his readers to not seek and destroy, but he is asking them to go farther. He is asking them to bless rather than harm. I want us to stop for a moment and consider what we mean by blessing so that we can gain a fuller sense of what Peter is asking of his readers. Blessing is a word that comes with both a definition and a tradition. The definition of blessing means to prosper someone; to assist another in being spiritual, emotional, physically and financially prosperous. It means to assist another in becoming whole. The tradition is that God had given God's blessing to Abraham and Sarah and that they were to pass this blessing, this prospering down to each successive generation until it could be given to all people and to all nations. Within Judaism what this meant was that parent's blessed their children hoping their children would live full and rich lives just as Jesus was doing when he blessed the children. He was passing God's spiritual, emotional, physical and yes, financial blessing on to those on which he laid his hands. This blessing of the other, of those whom we want to seek out and destroy, is what Peter told his readers that they were supposed to do. Which means this is what we are supposed to do. The question becomes then, how do we reprogram ourselves to bless rather than to destroy?

Our reprogramming comes through changing our posture and our orientation. Let me explain. When we are the aggrieved party, meaning that we believe someone has hurt us, or our reputation, or we are jealous because they have something we think that we ought to have, a space of anger opens between us. We then either mentally or physically do one or all of the following. We cross our arms to signal we have broken our relationship with them. We raise our fists to strike them in order to destroy them. We show our "angry face" in order to demonstrate our displeasure. Each of these postures is a prelude to attacking and destroying. What Peter asks of us is that we practice different postures. Listen again and see if you can hear different postures in these word pictures from Peter. "Finally, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind." These are postures of open arms, of embracing care, of prayerful concern and of shared space. These postures move us from aggression to support.

A second way of understanding this reprogramming practice is to see it as a change of orientation. When we are aggrieved we often turn our backs on people. We break relationships. We turn toward the dark side which leads to seeking and destroying and away from the light, from Jesus, who calls us to bless. Peter tells us that we are to deal with this by turning around. Listen again, "Let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it." This is a conscious turning away from seeking and destroying and toward an attitude of blessing. This is an internal reorienting of our hearts toward the other. In combination, these two actions offer the possibility of changing our internal wiring.

Right now we live in an angry time; in a time of seeking and destroying. Shoppers are hurting security guards. People without masks are screaming in the faces of state troopers. Protestors are calling for our governor to be lynched. People are fighting in grocery isles. It is easy to be swept up in this. But Christians are called to be different people. We are called to be people of blessing. My challenge to all of us this week is to find a way to bless someone; to prosper them spiritually, emotionally or financially such that their lives are made better by our sympathy, our love, our tender hearts and our humble minds.