

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Getting Even...or Not”
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June 26, 2016

Psalm 72:1-7, Luke 9:51-62

He knew it was coming. He knew that Gordie was going to get even. A couple of weeks ago when Gordie Howe died there were all sorts of interviews and tributes given about him. One evening on the news the sportscaster was visiting with a famous hockey player, whose name I do not recall at this moment...shows that I did not grow up around here...and they were reminiscing about Howe and the fact that if someone ever did something to him on the ice, Howe always got even. This player said that it had happened to him. One game he had accidentally high-sticked Howe. The instant it happened, the player said he knew that he was in trouble. The rest of the game the player waited for Howe to get even. But it didn't come. Then the next time they played, nothing. And the next and the next. Some people might think, the player said, that this meant that Howe had forgotten about...oh no...it was just a matter of time. Then in the very next game, out of nowhere, there was Howe and he clobbered the player. In real life, the player concluded, Howe was the nicest guy you would ever want to meet, but on the ice, he always got even.

Getting even...it was what human beings do. In fact, let me ask how many of you have ever wanted to get even with someone; someone who said something mean to you? Bullied you? Hurt you? Took something from you? What is interesting about this is that most of us don't even have to think about it. Wanting to get even appears to be built into our DNA. It seems to be one of the most ancient emotional responses there is. People have been getting even since the dawn of time. You attack me, I attack you. You insult me, I insult you. Why? My take on it is this, that when someone hurts us, insults us, takes something from us, it is as if they are taking a part of us; that we feel less than we were before. We don't feel whole anymore. Our very being has been diminished. We are ashamed and hurt. The only way we know how to get back that part of us then is to get even, because in getting even it is like we are taking back from the other person what they took from us. We are restoring ourselves to our full selves. So getting even on or off of the ice is what we do.

That sense of getting even is at the heart of our story this morning. Jesus and his disciples are walking from the northern part of the Jewish homeland, where Galilee is, to the southern part of the Jewish homeland where Jerusalem is. The only issue is that right between the two areas, right in the middle, is the territory of the Samaritans, who were enemies of the Jews. Normally Jews would not walk through this territory. They would go all the way around it, adding an entire day to their journey. Jesus and his disciples decided that they would cross it. My guess is that they did so because Jesus had, earlier in this ministry had good relationships with the Samaritans...one of the few Jews to do so. But this time something was different. The Samaritans saw that he was headed to Jerusalem and suddenly Jesus became the enemy again. For this reason, they refused Jesus a place to stay. Jesus' disciples, believing that the Samaritans had insulted Jesus and themselves and so they had to get even. They decided the best

way to get even was the nuclear option. They wanted to reign down fire from heaven, destroy the Samaritans and thus get even.

What is fascinating about the story is Jesus' response. He doesn't do what we might expect him to do; to say to the disciples, "Hey haven't you been paying attention. Remember, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Wake up and smell the coffee guys." No, he doesn't do that. Instead he rebukes them. For most of us this morning that word rebuke doesn't mean much. In fact, it's a word we seldom if ever use. Yet in the stories of Jesus, it is the most powerful criticism that Jesus ever uses. And he uses it only when he is stopping someone or something from destroying what God is trying to do in the world, and that is giving life to all. Jesus rebukes demons who are destroying people's lives. He rebukes storms that are about to kill. He rebukes Peter when Peter tells Jesus not to go to the cross. In other words, Jesus rebukes someone or something that is life denying and not life giving. Thus the disciples desire to get even is not simply out of alignment with what Jesus and God are about, it is literally destroying the life that God wants to give. It is destroying because it is taking part of another and leaving them less than they were.

All of this is not good news for those of us whose first inclination when we are hurt, is to want to get even. So the question this morning is how do we move away from getting even?

What I want to offer you this morning then are two practices that I believe can help us all as we try to move away from getting even and move into a more Christ-like frame of mind. The first is based on a simple Christian mantra, or saying that we can offer up every morning. And it is this, "No one can hurt me because I am a child of God." What I mean by this is that who we are, what we are, our value as human beings, is based not on what our families, friends, enemies or society has given to us, but on the fact that we are children of God; beloved of God. Thus no one can take anything from us. No one can take our honor. No one can take our dignity. No one can take anything from us that will diminish us because all we have that matters is from God and God will never remove it from us. Thus no one can hurt us and so we never need to get even.

The second is a positive practice...and that is that we are to love all persons regardless of who they are or what they do to us. It has often been said that the best offense is a good defense, right? Well I would turn that around. The best defense is a good offense...and our offense as Christians is that we are to be constantly loving those around us. I realize that this sounds like nothing more than what I am supposed to say...just love, love, love. Yet the reality of our choosing to love, meaning to look beyond the surface of the person who may be offending or bullying us, is to see that they do so because this is what God does for us. God loves us, God pours God's love into us so that we can find life, joy and peace. Thus if we are coworkers with God, then our task is to give life as well.

My challenge for you for this week is this, to ask how am I resisting getting even and instead being life giving with those around me.