

March 29, 2009
Lent V, Year B
Jeremiah, 31:31-34
Hebrews, 5:5-10
John, 12:20-33

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Can you imagine what a memo from the C.E.O. would sound like these days? One columnist suggested this:

We are happy to report that Bring Your Child to Work Day has been renamed Bring Your Child to Do Work Day. We hope that you will contribute unstintingly to the Gummy Bears Overtime Fund. ... We are particularly saddened that the elevator privileges for housekeeping will once again be on a pay-to-play basis. In order to maintain company morale, however, the mojito fountain in the executive lounge will continue to operate as usual.¹

How angry are you that our so-called 'best and brightest' are partying on the public dole? Even though many companies have hemorrhaged billions and wreaked havoc on the economy, even though they've been resuscitated by enormous infusions of public money, many corporate fat cats still receive fat salaries and fat bonuses.

A.I.G., Citi, GM, and other poorly managed corporations have been deemed too big to fail because their failure would imperil the economy and cause too much suffering. Many of us are angry that big wigs are not having to live with the consequences of their greed, foolishness, irresponsibility, incompetence. It's not only tycoons and corporate executives, but many ordinary people who bought McMansions beyond their means or piled up debt beyond their ability to pay – many of these appear to be getting bailed out as well. If you were restrained in choosing a home, honest in making your loan application, able to afford your mortgage, paid your bills, then now you are subsidizing people who were either too self-indulgent, too dishonest, too foolish, or some combination of those. You couldn't keep up with the Joneses, but now you're propping up the Joneses. Economies, societies, civilizations are built on trust. Can there be trust with such unfairness?

The Good News, of course, is that ultimately we do not have to live with the consequences of our decisions and behavior. Every penitent knows that God forgives us and welcomes us to life in him no matter what we do. But I don't expect that every Christian would agree that the government – all of us collectively – should now step in to shower moolah upon the greedy, foolish, irresponsible and incompetent as if their decisions and behavior have no consequences. For a lot of people the question is: "Which hurts me more: bailing them out or letting them sink?" We want justice, but we may not be willing to pay the price.

Have you had punishment fantasies lately? I confess to imagining an auto-da-fe of the greedy execs. The ceremony would begin with an elaborate procession. Starting at the New York Stock Exchange building on Wall Street, the condemned masters of the universe would be paraded in manacles and riding bulls straight up Broadway, through Times Square, around Columbus Circle, and into Central Park to the Great Lawn. The best and the brightest would be accompanied by clowns and jesters, marching bands and frilly floats. There'd have to be some of the Macy's balloons, especially the one of Humpty Dumpty. I'd love to see it. I'd even

¹ Patricia Marx, 'Shouts and Murmurs: Memo From the C.E.O.,' *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2009, p. 37.

settle for some of them simply being tried and thrown into jail, but what kind of personal price would I be willing to pay to make it happen? Would I be willing to give up my vacation? My job? My savings? What price would you be willing to pay for justice and accountability?

While President Obama has argued that we shouldn't govern out of anger, some argue that punishing "those who harm the common good [is really a form of altruism, especially when this punishment involves a high cost to ourselves]."² Our anger could inspire us to pay a big personal price to insure that the bad actors are not insulated from their decisions. Research suggests that only 30 to 40 percent of us are willing to pay a personal price to punish someone who has damaged the common good. The 30 to 40 percent who are willing to pay a personal price to punish freeloaders are also those people who are most likely to help those less fortunate than themselves, the people who give to charity.

I might be part of that 30-40 percent. I'd like to stick it to those Welfare Kings. But, a better question is: Would punishment make a positive difference? Is punishment our proper focus? As our anger builds and divisions deepen, I think of Lincoln's Second Inaugural, a year before the end of the Civil War. He acknowledged the horrific suffering endured, but he didn't lighten the load of people. Rather, he appealed to their best instincts and began asking the Union to forgive the Confederacy. He said, "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged." Lincoln suggested that we didn't want to see ourselves as better than others. He also reminded us that the enemy was our brother.

The suffering and injustice of our times is nothing like that of the Civil War. But an overlooked casualty of our economic turmoil is the damaged relationships and undermined trust. There's enormous justified anger, but how can we use our righteous indignation constructively? How can this experience transform us positively?

If you have played by the rules, are you ready to forgive those who are being bailed out? Can you get over being chumped by freeloaders, some of them extremely wealthy? If Lincoln had given the Inaugural Address just a couple months ago, what Jesus quotes might he have had for us? Perhaps, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth." (Mt 6:19) Or, maybe, "If someone drags you to court and sues for the shirt off your back, give him your coat also." (Mt 5:40) Or, "Sell all that you have and give to the poor." (Lk 17:22) There are scores of other choices.

The economic crisis could remind us of our interdependence. We cherish the illusion of being independent and generally resist acknowledging the inter-connectedness of our what we consider to be personal decisions and behavior. What we eat, whether we smoke, how much we exercise – those decisions impact other people. If we don't look after our health, then we're likely to consume more public resources. If we cheat on our taxes, then others will have to make up the difference. If our car gets ten miles per gallon and we drive fifty miles a day, we're putting a lot more pollution into the air than the person who walks and takes the Metro. Yet rather than direct attention at our own irresponsibility, we comfort ourselves by pointing out all the pollution produced by an executive flying in the corporate jet. We direct attention away from ourselves.

As we reflect upon how our decisions impact other people, we recognize that we each do things that diminish the common good and that we each have opportunities to enhance the common good. Every crisis presents opportunities. Perhaps one opportunity now is a renewal of a sense of responsibility to one another,

² Shankar Vedantam, 'The Rational Underpinnings of Irrational Anger,' *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2009, p. A05.

that our choices are not simply about ourselves. We're all in this together. Each of us bears at least a bit of responsibility for our troubles, but we still have a lot of anger focused on those who have betrayed our trust most egregiously.

Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, pointed out, "Many centuries ago, the Jewish sages asked, who is a hero of heroes? They answered, not one who defeats his enemy but one who turns an enemy into a friend."³ Do the Jewish sages suggest that we need to change our idea of who are the best and the brightest, that the best and brightest are those who are able to make a stranger, or even an enemy, into a friend? Do you think Bernie Madoff could be your friend?

Sacks observes that our economy operates out of the principle of competition, each person pursuing his own interest. In a competitive world, contracts are essential. We make contracts, even minor ones like buying a tank of gas, whenever we judge it to benefit us, when it's in our self-interest. Both parties enter a contract for their own benefit. Contracts are the way of the world, but contracts are not the way of God.

Sacks distinguishes contracts from covenants: "A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. ... It is about you and me coming together to form an US. That is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform. So economics and politics, the market and the state, are about the logic of competition. Covenant is about the logic of cooperation."

God makes covenants with us, not contracts. He accepts us and loves us and rejoices in us no matter what. He asks us not to fulfill a contract with him, not to earn his favor. We already have his favor. He asks us to honor our relationship with him, by trusting him and loving him, and even when we don't, he still honors our relationship and loves us.

The prophet Jeremiah lived during far worse times than our own. In the early sixth century before Christ, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem. They razed the Temple. They exiled the Jewish ruling class, the educated, the merchants and craftsmen – Judah's top talent, all sent packing to Babylon. Davidic rule ceased. It appeared that the history of the Jewish people had come to an end. It appeared that God had broken his promise. But Jeremiah still had hope. He declared that judgment and catastrophe was not God's final word, that this disaster was an opportunity for renewal, that God was making a new covenant with his people.

To prove it, to show people his commitment to the community, Jeremiah made a symbolic act: he bought real estate. As King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were laying siege to Jerusalem, just as Jerusalem is falling and everything looked its bleakest, Jeremiah bought a field about three miles north of the city. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Jeremiah believed that God had a future for his people.

In the chapter following today's reading, Jeremiah invested in real estate because he believed that God would continue to honor his relationship with his people and that God would transform the hearts of his people. Jeremiah expected that the Exile would last for seventy years, but he dared to have hope, a vision of a glorious future – not merely a rebuilt community, but a transformed community. Despite all of the uncertainty, the chaos, the apparent hopelessness, Jeremiah invested himself in his hope. In the horror of defeat and suffering, he believed that God was renewing his covenant, drawing closer to people, becoming even more intimate with them, changing hearts.

³ Jonathan Sacks, 'The Relationship between the People and God,' paper delivered at the Lambeth Conference, 2008.

As we move through our crisis, we can choose to rebuild our economy, our society, even ourselves so that things are restored to what they were, or we can allow God to transform us, to change our hearts. What would that look like? We'd not worry about keeping up with the Joneses. We'd value cooperation more than competition. We'd tend to relationships, not self-interest. We'd reflect on how our choices affect other people. Our heroes wouldn't be masters of the universe, but those who make friends of strangers and enemies. It would look like the law of God had been written on our hearts.

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