

## “Just Desserts Spoil”: A Sermon by Chris Hazlaris 5/10/20

Last week an older neighbor of mine who lives uptown on my block approached me, visibly angry. Donny is his name, and Donny must have seen me park my car, because as I was walking up the path to my house, I noticed he came running down from his patio. Enraged, he intercepted me and told me to watch out when I pull out of my driveway next, because he was about to litter the middle of the road with nails. Donny proceeded to tell me that he was infuriated by a garbage man that drove “way too fast” down our street, and this was going to be his way of teaching him a lesson. Now it made a lot of sense to me why Donny could be angry – just last week his sports car had been dented by a negligent driver; however, whether or not this accident was fueling his impulse, Donny’s plan still clearly sounded a bit excessive. But he insisted. Donny told me, “I’m going to show that driver that you don’t get away with that sort of stuff in our neighborhood. It’s not safe. People need to learn.” Then he seemed to compose himself for a second. He knew I was involved in youth ministry and that I work in a church and he said, “Chris I am a man of God. I believe wholeheartedly in the Bible. But sometimes when I see things, I think God looks at me and says, ‘Donny, do what you gotta do.’ So, Chris, when you are driving away, watch out for those nails.”

The great thinker Nietzsche once declared “It seems impossible for us to suffer without making someone else pay for it.” Friends, our world is built on just desserts, the notion that it’s sweet to give people what they deserve. An “eye for an eye” is not just an ancient code from Old Testament times, but it, truly, remains the rhythm of order in our world today, and we are all aware I’m sure that “getting people back” goes beyond this single instance from my neighbor Donny.

Here are a few other common examples that come to mind:

- Young males, like myself, are taught constantly to fight back when challenged because true men don’t back down.
- Think of the Internet comments section or rush-hour traffic, where expressing rage at someone that crosses you is the status quo.
- Or imagine those of us that struggle to let a conflict go with a family member or significant other because we feel a burning desire to protest that we are, if not right, then dominant.

What’s amazing about what I call our “Just Desserts DNA” is that sometimes we even justify retaliation under a Christian framework. We may say to ourselves: “God wouldn’t want that person to get away with this; He’d want them to be taught a lesson. He wouldn’t want to me or my people to be pushed around.” And, it’s true, convincing ourselves that our Lord empowers us to get people back, to ensure our enemies get their just desserts, that He sometimes says, “Do what you gotta do,” feels right, gives us a sense of being justified.

But what would happen if we stepped out of this self-glorified Big Brother role and trusted God, the perfectly Loving force that runs everything, to be the only one who judges, the only one who changes hearts and behavior through HIS methods – what if we did this and made

our only job to be mercy? What if. It's so contrary to our notion of control and power, but in many instances that kind of "letting go" IS a higher calling that God asks of us.

In our reading today from first Peter, we hear these words, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Holy in biblical terms means "to be set apart," and so to me these words imply something central to our faith: It sure as heck may not be fair, or feel right to our human nature, it may go against everything our experience tells us about this dog-eat-dog world, but real Christians are supposed to behave differently than everyone else. We that have been called out of darkness in Christ have a higher calling, and the Word of God directly tells us so.

But, you know, it's funny. I've never found just saying "do this because the Bible says so" to be a convincing method to inspire a change in behavior in myself or anyone else. Never. It is for this reason that when I work with youth on the topic of mercy, I often ask them if they can help me think about reasons -tangible, real reasons- why forgiveness and mercy might be important tenants to live by, other than "because it's been commanded." And when I ask my kids, "Why, really, do you think we should we forgive," I often I get a few answers I want to share with you. And I hope they inspire you the way they inspire me.

The first answer my youth often give me is that we should forgive, because if we act in kindness, good things will happen to us, and when we don't, BAD things will happen to us. Now many people think this is naïve, and I think it is important to point out, as I often point out to youth, it may NOT be true that that your good works will bear earthly rewards. Good people in this world are often unrewarded and bad folks that do wrong can escape scot-free and maybe get far by doing wrong. But, and this is a big but, I think there is also tremendous wisdom in this first response if we judge the "rewards" of our mercy not to be earthly rewards but rewards from within.

Let me explain. I had a pastor friend of mine speak to me a few years ago about a deep trial she was having with a coworker. After years of fighting urges to get back at him for the way she felt he belittled her in the workplace, she finally made a conscious decision to begin the process of letting go of her animosity. "Chris, she told me, I learned that vengeance is a poison that you prepare for someone else, but only you drink it." Let me read that again, because I think there's so much wisdom there: Vengeance is a poison that you prepare for someone else, but only you drink it. This is why I think my kids were on to something when they implied that you reap what you sow. Plotting or enacting "punishment" upon others to give them their just desserts, even if it's in a brief moment, may give a temporary release but our hearts weren't created for ill-will, we have to believe that, so the more we try to fight fire with fire, the more we are charring a sacred essence inside of us. Another way to say this is, "JUST DESSERTS SPOIL because what we are actually dishing out is not righteousness but inner turmoil."

So that's the first reason I get from my kids: We forgive because, on a soul level at least, it brings goodness to us and we avoid getting back at others because doing so slowly,

imperceptibly wounds us. The second reason the youth I work with frequently offer for why we should forgive is more practical than spiritual. We should have mercy, they say, because our choices have ripple effects, and if we choose to act out negatively against things that offend us, it often continues to spill forward in a chain of negative consequences.

Take Donny from the first example. Donny was acting from a place of anger, maybe justified anger. And he felt that by putting nails on the street, he could both purge that anger and teach the garbage man a lesson, setting things right in his mind and ending the problem once and for all. But, if Donny followed through with it, I doubt it would have ended there. I can imagine a scenario in which, infuriated by the nails and a damaged truck, the garbage man then escalated a confrontation with Donny, maybe even starting a war of passive-aggressiveness in which he, say, started to purposely skip picking up trash at Donny's house or to always meet him with a glare or a rude gesture.

Even if the garbage man didn't know the nails were deliberate or came from Donny, imagine what could still transpire from these "just desserts." The driver, inconvenienced and irate, would likely in turn generate negative energy to every innocent face he passed going forward on the street. Maybe he'd now make an angry comment to his boss about being underpaid, and his boss in turn, would take out his resentment on his partner at home, and so on and so forth. We so often hear the phrase "pay it forward," a small act of kindness can go a long way, but we seem to forget the reciprocal is also true. We have a terrifying power to reverberate negativity as well, and even though dishing out just desserts may make us feel justified, maybe we are called to think about how they don't end there, that as humans our justice is never perfect or final. And that's the wisdom of the second answer I hear from my youth. JUST DESSERTS SPOIL because, contrary to our default way of thinking, they create more problems than they end.

So, so far, I've discussed how the youth I actually work with argue for forgiveness 1) because internally it's good for us, and 2) because many of them believe, genuinely, what Dr. Martin Luther King once powerfully professed: "that toughness only begets a greater toughness." The third thing I hear my young people say is perhaps the most profound, and something I usually need to hear most. They tell me, whether in our most intimate relationships or with the stranger we rub against in passing, we should forgive because we mess up too, and God always has mercy on us when we do that.

Today is Mother's Day, and I couldn't help but feel the essence of this special day in our 1 Peter text. The Word reads, "Like newborn infants, you should long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — <sup>3</sup> because indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." To me this passage screams "You have been showered with love, with Grace; now spread it to others!" Just as we my friends have tasted the goodness from our biological mothers and can trust them, let us do the same with the Lord and God's ways of mercy even if they may at first be counterintuitive to us. Are we going to be like Philip in today's Gospel and, now that we have been presented with Christian freedom, act like we no longer know or trust the ways of our Creator? A child who truly knows and loves his mother gives to the world in

kind, and that's a primary reason why we are called to forgive. These brilliant kids I work with seem to say it over and over again. Our lives are a conglomeration of blessings – we exist, a miracle in itself, but we've also been gifted education, food security, talents, and most importantly, we can rest in the knowledge that because of Christ's death and resurrection, God is not only with us when pain happens but he is actively in the middle of it trying to restore us and bring healing and life now until the end of time... ALL because of the Grace of God, which we do not deserve! If we take time to acknowledge this (and this is why I'm such a big advocate of counting blessings as prayer), we realize that the least we can do back is show a glimpse of that same Grace and love to others.

Many if not most people that are our enemies are not going to come back into our lives shocking us with never-before-seen love, friendship, and helpfulness, and this is especially true for people we have brief rub-ups with, say, on the road or in the comment section of the internet. However, our heavenly Mother who gave us life and sustains it believes all people are worth our patience, that they have gifts and are gifts, even if they seem like the most intolerable and unlovable people in the moment. I think even a brief mental reminder of that is helpful in our day-to-day arguments and frustrations. What would it take for us to pause in the rat race of life and try to see others as Mom sees them? Our Gospel for today from John reads, and allow me to change the parental gender, "In my Mother's house, there are many dwelling places," perhaps indicating that that eternal communion is the ultimate Truth for all of us, not just those we like, and that hard reality is called to start here, with us.

In closing I want to leave us with the image we get from Acts, in which the apostle Stephen, in a pretty remarkable parallel to Christ, is being stoned to death and with his last breath cries out, God, do not hold this sin, this mistake, against my enemies. Stephen represents a willingness to forgive, a higher calling I think God yearns for me to meet every day. But I, we, shouldn't just do it because God says so; we strive for this really hard, really radical "higher" teaching, or as 1 Peter says these "spiritual sacrifices" because, as the youth of the church suggest:

- 1) ONE: They are good for our hearts.
- 2) TWO: Our choices matter, they ripple forward in powerful ways.
- 3) And THREE: To not have patience betrays the mercy, the life-giving Grace we've been given by our Lord.

Ultimately, on this Mother's Day, it's a question of faith; it's a question of "Who do we say we belong to. Our heavenly Mom, or the world?" If we really trust our eternal mother, we have to believe that even the smallest encounters we have are on fire with sacred opportunity... opportunity to accept the higher calling and not the status quo, an opportunity to show Mom Above that we have heard Her good news, we have seen the miraculous-ness of Her gifts to us every day (gifts of life, gifts of love, the gift of salvation), and with this constant flow of mercy, of life-giving milk, we won't settle for just desserts. We were made for so much more than that. Amen.