

“A Better Way”
Judges 15:9-20/Matthew 5:38-42

During these final weeks in our summer-long look at the book of *Judges*, we are focusing on Samson. For some of you, his name alone evokes memories of the Biblical scene when he stands between two pillars of a house and pushes them apart. We will close out our series with that memorable act, yet as we have seen, there is much more to his life than its conclusion.

We began by hearing of how his mother had longed to have a child and when visited by an angel promised to raise her son with a devout faith. Last week, we learned of a troubling side to Samson for at a week-long wedding feast, he posed a riddle to thirty young men telling them if they could figure out its answer, he would give them new garments. They were unable to solve it and threatened harm to the bride and her family if she did not secure the answer. When she does, Samson becomes incensed and storms off to a nearby town, kills thirty other men and takes their garments to pay his wager. He then abandons his wife who is given in marriage to the best man.

That’s where we left events, and in between that text and the one before us today, Samson cools down and thinks that he can return to his wife as if nothing had happened. His former father-in-law intervenes and offers another daughter in marriage. Infuriated, Samson ties torches to the tail of 300 foxes and sends the animals out to destroy grain and vineyards of some Philistines. On learning that Samson is behind that crime, they kill his former wife and father-in-law and he exacts revenge, taking the lives of innumerable Philistines before going into hiding.

Our text picks up the narrative at that point. Samson is in the territory of Judah—one of the tribes of Israel—when the Philistines raid a Judahite city in response to what he has done. Leaders from Judah go out to the invaders and ask why they have attacked. Upon hearing the answer they go to Samson and say “Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then have you done to us?” He replies, “As they did to me, so I have done to them.” His personal war had begun to affect them and so the leaders announce that they plan to tie him with ropes and hand him over to his pursuers. Samson makes them promise they will not harm him, and when the transfer happens, he breaks free and kills 1000 with the jawbone of a donkey.

Thus, the story of Samson to this point is one of ever-escalating violence as one angry response leads to something worse which leads to more bloodshed. It all started when he was humiliated that the riddle had been solved and later when he realized his wife was the bride of another. Instead of accepting his part in either outcome, Samson retaliated. “As they did to me, so have I done to them,” he declared. He wasn’t the last person to adopt such thinking.

As a first year student at Davidson, I was still unsure of myself around young women and extremely cautious when it came to romantic ventures. Thus, it was a pleasant surprise when I received the unexpected encouragement of an anonymous birthday card during the fall of my freshman year. Since the card was unsigned, I began to imagine which classmate had sent it to me and soon settled in on an attractive first-year student with whom I shared one course. I told my buddies how I was sure the card was from her and speculated aloud as to why she had been so reluctant to express her interest directly. It was only after I asked her out that I learned the answer as she said “no” and my roommate then told me another guy had sent the card as a joke.

I was humiliated and plotted revenge, but did nothing for the rest of that school year. As sophomores, the perpetrator of that hoax lived next door to me and had one of those erasable message boards on the door. One day while he was in class, I left a note on it in a style completely different than my own, not only because it was legible, but adding hearts to dot the “i”s. It was an innocuous note, saying only “David, sorry I missed you,” but it was signed with

the letter "B." Later that day, he asked me if I had seen someone come by his room. "No one out of the ordinary." Encouraged he had taken the bait, I began to leave regular messages just after he had left the room, always from this anonymous "B." It drove him crazy as he continued to talk to me about who it might be. Over Christmas break, I even had classmates take letters I had written and mail them to him to from their hometown so as to add to his confusion.

In January, David began dating someone named Bev so I stopped the messages allowing him to assume all of those anonymous notes had come from her. It wasn't until the summer after their relationship ended that I told David the truth. I expected to feel this great sense of triumph, but instead, felt foolish for having wasted my time on such a ridiculous effort. And I was grateful that he didn't try to continue the cycle and get revenge on me, but instead simply let it go.

The same could not be said of Samson for throughout those events of long ago, he continued to feed the flames of retaliation when the better choice would have been to break the cycle. To put a halt to the problem by refusing to respond in kind and model a different way.

I think that was Jesus' point in the part of his Sermon on the Mount we read moments ago. His comments are from a stretch in that homily where he compared Jewish law—standards in our Old Testament—to his teaching. In some cases, he has taken those ancient guidelines and intensified them for his followers. In our passage, though, he turns the old standard on its ear.

"You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" In those words, Jesus is recalling part of God's instructions to the Israelites centuries earlier. On the same day that Moses shared the 10 Commandments with the people, he went on to articulate further teachings from God. Among them was the moment Jesus' father had said "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life; eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (Exodus 21:23-25). To our ears, such responses sound harsh and very un-Godlike, yet for the people who first heard those words it was actually an improvement. God was trying to "curb the tendency toward unlimited private revenge." (Boring, M. Eugene, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 193-4). Samson's behavior years later with the Philistines offers a clear example of what could happen if individuals took justice into their own hands. "As they did to me so I have done to them," he had rationalized. In his law, God had sought to lessen that kind of limitless harm.

"You have heard it said" Jesus began, "But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer.'" He goes on to talk about what to do when struck on the face or sued in court or settling with an accuser. The details of his teachings quickly get complicated and we should guard against taking his message here as a literal guidelines for what we should do in such moments. His instructions warrant a sermon all its own, but in essence Jesus is talking about an end to retaliation. Pointing out that when one seeks to exact justice on one's own, even when it matches the harm received, it rarely settles the problem. Thus, he called for a different way, a better way for his followers. Let me give you an example of what that looks like from the world of Little League baseball.

Some of you have probably heard the story of what happened twelve days ago. It involved two boys named Kaiden Shelton, who prefers to be called Bubs, and Isaiah Jarvis, who goes by the name Zay. Bubs pitches for his Pearland, Texas, team while Zay played for their opponent, a squad from Tulsa, Oklahoma. The teams were competing in the finals of the Little League World Series Southwest Regional on August 9. The winner would head to Williamsport.

In the bottom half of the first inning, Zay came to bat with his team behind by one run. Soon he was down to his final strike when Bubs threw an inside pitch that got away from him. It smashed into the earflap of Zay's helmet, knocking it off his head. The batter hit the ground clutching at his head. When that happens in the major leagues there can be a warning by the

umpire and an emptying of benches. Far too often, later in the same game, a pitcher on the other side will target a batter from the opposing squad as retaliation. Zay Jarvis modeled a better way.

“Coaches and trainers rushed over to him,” wrote Jenni Carlson. “I was really scared,” Zay said later. “I got really shook because I’ve never been hit by that speed before, especially in the head.” He made his way to first base,” Carlson went on “and started talking to his coach, but after a moment, Zay looked across the infield to the pitcher’s mound. Bubs’ shoulders were slumped. His head was down. He was crying. Zay tried to get his attention, hollering his name, Bubs either didn’t hear him or wouldn’t look at him... Without thinking, Zay tossed aside his helmet and walked straight toward Bubs. Even when Zay stepped onto the mound, Bubs still didn’t react, but Zay stepped in front of him, put his arms around Bubs and started talking to him. ‘I’m all right,’ Zay told him. ‘You’re doing great. Take deep breaths. Just think happy thoughts.’...Even though his coaches ultimately decided to pull him from the game, Bubs said what Zay did meant a lot. ‘If it was anybody else, it would have gone a whole different way.’”

“Zay told a reporter ‘When I saw him getting emotional I was just trying to be like Jesus and comfort him and really let him know I was okay. I just wanted to make sure he was okay, too. At the end of the day,’ Zay added, ‘it’s just a baseball game.’” (Carlson, Jenni, “Tulsa Little League baseballer is the feel-good story we need right now,” *The Oklahoman*, 08/12/22)

At the end of a day, that’s what God wants us to do as well not only on the baseball field, but in the fullness of life. God wants us to resist the attempt to settle the score when harmed and respond in a better way. Even Samson began to show signs of learning that lesson for after all of the violence and retaliation that had marked his life that judge from the past called on God who responded by providing literal water. And the narrator then tells us “When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived.” I’m confident the same outcome awaits us, too, if we can resist that natural feeling of wanting to get even and instead model the way of Jesus.