Sweet Revenge?

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Lord Byron wrote, some 200 years ago, “Sweet is revenge.” Is it really?

The classic tale of Moby Dick, by Herman Melville, is a story about revenge. Its opening line, “Call me Ishmael,” is one of the most memorable first sentences in English literature. Ishmael is the only member of a whaling expedition who lives to tell the story of the great whale Moby Dick. The commander of this whaling voyage, Captain Ahab, is the original strong-willed man. He’s captain of the Pequod, a 19th century whaling vessel sailing out of Nantucket. Ahab or “old Thunder” as he is called by his crew, is unflinching in his resolve to hunt down and kill the whale that took his leg. Nothing can thwart his resolve. Nothing can stand in his way.

Two other whaling ship captains warn Ahab and his crew about this ferocious whale. Even the mutinous threats of his crew fail to dissuade him. Captain Ahab is obsessed with a maniacal desire for revenge.

After locating Moby Dick, three whaleboats are sent in hot pursuit. This gigantic whale easily crushes two whaleboats, leaving Captain Ahab and his crew to fend for themselves. Moby Dick rams Ahab’s boat and disables it. Ahab stands his ground as he plunges a harpoon into Moby Dick’s hide. Ahab becomes tangled in the cord attached to the harpoon. When Moby Dick retreats, Ahab is dragged to his watery grave. Captain Ahab has become a victim of his own revenge.

Revenge isn’t sweet for Captain Ahab. His revenge proves bitter and futile. John Milton wrote in Paradise Lost, “Revenge at first, though sweet, bitter, ere long, back on itself recoils.” Revenge isn’t sweet after all.

Today’s story testifies to the perils associated with revenge. David has fled into the wilderness to escape Saul’s jealous wrath. He enlists an odd assortment of malcontents and misfits to join his ranks. Since living as a fugitive is hardly a full time job, David and his band of brothers function much like a neighborhood watch group. They patrol the desert to make it safe for people.

David and his men have been providing protection for people like Nabal. Nabal is a fabulously wealthy man who is married to Abigail. Abigail is intelligent and beautiful, the whole package, as we say. Nabal, by contrast, is surly and mean.

Sermons from Vienna Presbyterian Church
October 6, 2013
So much for sweet revenge!

Since David and his men have offered them protection, he doesn’t think it improper for his men to stop by Nabal’s feast to ask for carry out. At sheep shearing season, there’s always plenty of extra food and beverage on hand.

David instructs his men to be on their best behavior when they ask for handouts. He urges them to say nice things to Nabal like “long life to you” and “peace be to you.” His men do as they are told, but Nabal’s response is downright rude. “Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse?” Nabal acts as though he has never heard of David. The countryside has been overrun with bandits who bully people into giving refreshment. Nabal sends them away empty-handed.

David is incensed with Nabal’s abrupt response. “Gird on your swords,” he orders his soldiers. David is ready to administer an old fashioned beat-down.

A servant of Nabal clues Abigail in on what’s happening. She wastes no time in preparing a proverbial feast for David and his band of merry men. She sends it in advance of her arrival to soften David up before they are formally introduced.

Abigail falls at David’s feet when they meet. “Let me take the blame, she begs.” Pay no attention to my foolish husband. He comes by his name naturally (his name means fool). “Please forgive the trespasses of your servant, for the Lord will make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord” (1 Samuel 25:28).

Abigail’s words virtually echo Samuel’s prophecies earlier spoken over David. She plays the role of a Biblical prophet who speaks and acts for God. She warns David that his rash act of revenge could jeopardize his future kingdom.

Her counsel stops David dead in his tracks. “Blessed be to the Lord who has sent you to meet me today. Blessed be your good sense. Blessed are you who has kept me today from bloodshed and revenge” (25:33).

Abigail returns home having successfully turned David away from revenge and saving his reign from endless retaliation. She intends on telling Nabal everything, but he’s so roaring drunk that she decides to wait until morning when he’s sobered up. When she tells Nabal what has happened, he goes into cardiac arrest and dies ten days later. The chapter closes with David and Abigail’s wedding.

So much for sweet revenge! Revenge is bitter and deadly. The Bible is full of warnings about revenge. I have chosen three passages for your consideration.

The first accompanies the well-known words, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Pay close attention to the words which introduce this passage:
“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge. Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

The second warning is located in Proverbs: “Do not say I’ll pay you back for the wrong. Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you” (20:22; 24:19). Otherwise, you’ll be caught in a vicious game called “paybacks are hell.”

The third originates in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Do not seek revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

The last portion of this passage is marked off in quotes. God says in Deuteronomy, “Vengeance is mine” (32:35). It only stands to reason that if “vengeance is mine,” then it can’t be yours and it can’t be mine.

In a collection of 5th century writings called Sayings of Desert Fathers, there is a story about a young novice monk who approaches his spiritual mentor Sisoes about this matter of vengeance. “Brother Sisoes, I was hurt by a fellow brother and how I’m angry and I want to avenge myself.” His mentor seeks to comfort him, but gives a gentle warning, “Don’t do that, my child, leave vengeance to God.” But it’s no use. The novice persists in wanting to seek vengeance. When Sisoes realizes that reason alone will never change the young man’s heart, he invites his student to join him in prayer. Sisoes prays, “O Lord, apparently we no longer need you to take care of us since we can now avenge ourselves. From now on, we can manage our own lives without your help.”

The young man interrupts his master. “Stop,” he cries. “Have mercy on me. I’m not going to fight my brother any longer.”

The Old Testament law of retribution promotes “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:22; Leviticus 24:18-20; Deuteronomy 19:21). There are still places in the world where this law is carried out with chilling precision. While such an injunction may strike you as punitive, its original purpose was to limit punishment to fit the crime.

Jesus turns this law of retribution upside down when he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer to him your left cheek. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matthew 5:38-42). Gandhi said “an eye for an eye would make the whole world blind.”

I read, recently, about a TV show entering its third season on ABC called “Revenge.” It’s a show in which people seek revenge. I don’t get the attraction. Don’t we see enough revenge in real life?
Revenge is sweet. We feel an initial burst of pleasure in paying someone back whom we feel has wronged us. But such feelings don’t last. Acts of revenge stimulate the region of the brain that delivers pleasure, yet such feelings are short lived. Revenge is not as sweet as it sounds. It doesn’t provide closure. Revenge does the opposite; it keeps the wound open and festering.

Revenge is a lie. It offers the prospect to get even but it almost never does. You see, pain to the injured and the injurer are never viewed in quite the same way. Pain always seems heavier to those on the receiving end. The pain I inflict always feels heavier to you than it does to me. Pain that is given and received never really balances out. If you hurt me and I retaliate, I may be satisfied that you have received your just deserts, but you will feel as though you haven’t done anything wrong to receive such hostility so you retaliate. Then it’s my turn. When will it ever stop?

The problem with revenge is there’s no end to it. Revenge goes on forever. Family feuds persist for generations. People take grudges to the grave with them. Revenge is endless.

One of the major themes in Shakespeare’s Hamlet is the futility of revenge. Hamlet wants to avenge the death of his father by the hand of Claudius. But Hamlet not only wants to kill Claudius. He wants to insure that his soul will be eternally damned.

Revenge goes on forever. The only way out of the cul-de-sac of revenge is through forgiveness. It is only as we contemplate the enormity of God’s forgiveness in this sacrament of Holy Communion that we find greater capacity to extend forgiveness to others. I’m inviting you, today, to exit this not-merry-go-round of revenge and seek the way of forgiveness. Identify someone in your circle of family and friends who needs your forgiveness. Heed Abigail’s warning and stop the madness!