

A Tit-for-Tat Kingdom

A Quick Review: in this series of sermons, we're exploring the New Testament contrast between the Kingdom of God, and what Jesus called "the kingdom of the world". The kingdom Jesus announced is (as he said to Pontius Pilate) "not from this world," because it operates differently from any kingdom or government of the world—past or present.

The kingdom of the world uses power, or the threat of power, to control behavior and compliance, which, isn't necessarily bad. But, while power can control behavior; it sets up a win/lose situation, which always creates resentment in the heart of the one who loses. Power's effect on the human heart is always negative.

And so, while the kingdom of the world seeks to "win," by whatever means necessary, the kingdom of God seeks to be faithful to the self-giving character of God, thereby revealing the most beautiful, dynamic, and transformative power in the universe. Jesus' disciples do great harm when they fail to preserve the uniqueness of that way.¹

If you were here last week, you may recall a quote from New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan. He said our difficulty with understanding scripture is, in part, "...not (because) those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."²

The Bible is full of symbolism and metaphor, and Crossan identifies a critical error that creates massive misunderstandings in biblical studies. From the kingdom parables of Jesus to the apocalyptic visions in Revelation, if we are to understand fully the kingdom of God, it is crucial that we honor the metaphoric imagery used in so many New Testament references.

I am indebted in this effort to a part of Gregory Boyd's book, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. While my focus is totally different than his, I am moving through one of his secondary themes. As always, I will publish my manuscript on the church's website, where you can check out my footnotes, if you're so inclined.

In 2004, video evidence confirmed that American soldiers were inflicting humiliating abuse on Iraqi soldiers at Abu Gharib prison. Days later, Iraqi terrorists made their own video showing the grotesque beheading of an American citizen, John Berg. In the video, the Iraqis said they executed Mr. Berg in response to the brutality endured by their own soldiers, and they vowed to continue "because we

¹ Adapted from Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005) Kindle edition, Location 473.

² John Dominic Crossan, *Who Is Jesus?* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

are a people of vengeance." To date, they have been true to their vow.³

When Americans learned of the beheading, most were inflamed with a sense of hatred. Social media went nuts with cries for vengeance—an eye for an eye, a head for a head. The life of John Berg had to be atoned and the honor of our nation had to be restored.

All that *is* "common sense" to a fallen humanity. The history of the world has been written in blood: a testament of violent retaliation and counter-retaliation. In all recorded history, only a few decades have seen no major wars.

The beheading of John Bern was in retaliation for inhumane treatment of Iraqis, which was in retaliation for 9/11, which was in retaliation for American support of Israel, which was in retaliation... And the onion peeling continues.

Retaliation and counter-retaliation between Arabs and Jews can be traced back, incident by incident, to the 1967 war, which was in retaliation for Egypt's blocking of the Strait of Tiran, which was in retaliation for the 1948 Palestinian-Israeli war... and the onion peeling continues—back to the first conquest of Canaan in the 12th century, BCE, and even further back to Abraham's banishing of Hagar and Ishmael, recorded in *Genesis 21*; and the onion peeling continues.

Irish Catholics and Protestants; Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda... Need I go on?

Fallen humans tend to identify their own group as righteous and any group that disagrees with them as evil: if they weren't evil, there'd be no conflict (it all started when he hit me back!); therefore, the way to end the conflict is to "rid the world of this evil." Remember President Bush's comments after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The "good" must extinguish the "evil," using all means necessary, including violence. This is the age-old "myth of redemptive violence" which is the belief that violence can redeem us and exterminate evil rather than extending and perpetuating it. It's just "common sense."

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* brilliantly capture the value of metaphor in describing these complex realities. In Homer, as in a lot of Greek tragedy, humans are driven by passions they can't completely control—passions to acquire and secure power and possessions, passions to sacrifice to certain gods, to uphold religious traditions, to establish a reputation, to protect loved ones, and to advance the cause of their tribe or nation.⁴ There's nothing inherently wrong in any of that.

The trouble is that other people have passions to secure their own possessions and expand their own power; they have their own gods to sacrifice to, their own traditions to defend, their own legacies to build, and, perhaps most importantly, their own tribal and national interests to advance. To Homer, this means

³ Ibid., Location 300.

⁴ Ibid., Location 274.

that, sooner or later, war is inevitable.

And, in Homer, "the gods" are always involved in human affairs. Human violence is not just the result of conflicting passions—it has supernatural dimensions. And all the while Zeus sits on Mount Olympus, amused by the sport of it all.⁵

The brilliance of Homer's metaphors lies in how closely they parallel scriptural metaphors. The Bible also speaks of rebellious gods, fallen principalities, powers and demons that influence human behavior. From a scriptural perspective, these fallen gods are behind all the conflict between nations; and it's hard not to get pulled into the fallen passions that fuel that violence. In fact, the demonic tribalism that sets "us" over against "them" seems completely natural to us in our fallen condition. It's just "common sense."

If you hit me, my "common sense" instinct is not to turn the other cheek! It's to hit you back—tit for tat, eye for eye, tooth for tooth! That's what makes the bloody kingdom of the world go around; and Jesus explicitly denounced it.

And all the while, Satan, the ultimate god of this age, watches the bloodshed with a demonic sense of amusement.

The true cause of violence, of course, is not "the enemy" outside ourselves, but something we and our enemy have in common; something more basic: the fact that the fallen human heart is idolatrous and subject to the powers that influence us. Theologian, Walter Wink, has a series of books describing and defining those powers that influence us: demonic, destructive powers, which are metaphoric projections of ourselves. (And calling them metaphoric projections doesn't make them less demonic!)

Of course, we must pursue peaceful solutions, and, to some degree, regarding specific conflicts, peaceful solutions can be achieved. But, as long as humans define personal and tribal worth and security in terms of power, possessions, traditions, reputations, religious behaviors, tribe, and nation, rather than in a relationship with their creator, violence is inevitable and will break out again. Gregory Boyd writes, "Any peace achieved by violence is a peace forever threatened by violence, thus ensuring that the bloody tit-for-tat game will be perpetuated."⁶

The hope of the world lies in a kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom that doesn't operate in a tit-for-tat mode, a kingdom that operates with a completely different understanding of power.

The unique nature of this different kingdom is revealed in our text for today. Some of Jesus' disciples were arguing over which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Their argument expressed the "power over" mindset

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Boyd, *op. cit.* location 336.

that characterizes the kingdom of the world. Jesus responded,

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” ~ LUKE 25:22-27 (NRSV)

Jesus not only rejects their “common sense” logic—he reverses it! His “not-from-this-world” kingdom would not be defined by “power;” it would be a kingdom in which greatness is defined by serving and sacrificing for others.

When one of his misguided disciples tried to fight like a kingdom-of-the-world participant, cutting off the ear of one of the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus, Jesus rebuked him and demonstrated the nature of his “not-from-this-world” kingdom by healing the soldier’s ear. The kingdom Jesus announced and demonstrated will advance, not by destroying the enemy who seeks to destroy you, but by loving, serving, and thereby transforming that enemy.

It’s a radically different kind of kingdom indeed, and the promise of this kingdom is that through its kind of power, hearts will be transformed.

And for those “common sense” doubters who say it will never work, I would refer to a quote from early 20th century poet and theologian, G. K. Chesterton: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and not tried.”

Next week we’ll take a look at two of the New Testament’s most graphic demonstrations of Jesus’ “not-from-this-world” kingdom. I hope you’ll join us.