

1 Samuel 15: 1-9

Samuel said to Saul, “The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’ ”

Matthew 18: 21

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Hosea 13:16

Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.

Luke 6: 37-38

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Deuteronomy 19:21

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. The rest shall hear and be afraid, and a crime such as this shall never again be committed among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Matthew 5: 38-42

“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 evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

2 Chronicles 25: 11-12

Amaziah took courage, and led out his people; he went to the Valley of Salt, and struck down ten thousand men of Seir. The people of Judah captured another ten thousand alive, took them to the top of Sela, and threw them down from the top of Sela, so that all of them were dashed to pieces.

Matthew 5: 43-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Joshua 8:24-26

When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.

Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Anyone who's read the Bible has come across great contradictions – contradictions of Biblical proportions, one might say – like those Lisa and I read to you this morning. The almighty Old Testament God of wrath and vengeance juxtaposed against the forgiving savior who taught us that love alone is the answer to every question.

Some believe the Old Testament records the giving of God's law to mankind, and the New Testament shows how Jesus was the messiah sent to fulfill that law. Others say the Old Testament is a history of God's chosen people, while the New Testament is a history of God coming in human form to atone for our sins.

I've yet to come across an explanation that satisfactorily reconciles for me the angry, vengeful almighty God with our patient, loving savior, or one that makes sense when presented in a Sunday-school classroom. At times, this can all be very confusing.

After years of study, and teaching Confirmation classes, and preparation for preaching, I think it's safe to say that given the passing of thousands of years and the many conflicting translations, and the will of many who have bent Bible scholarship to the whims and agendas of groups as diverse as the original apostles of Jesus, the emperors of the Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic church, and even evangelical preachers of the 20th century, anyone who says they can make complete sense of the narrative that lies in the 66 books of our Bible is speaking from a place I've given up on ever arriving.



The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word Almighty as, "Having absolute power over all." It used to be that if someone use the word "almighty," it was safe to assume they were referring to almighty God. When used in that context, I have no problem with a definition that includes, "Having absolute power over all." However, it appears that more and more we are confusing *ourselves* with *our God*, and we've taken the word "almighty" to define our country and our desires.

More and more I hear people, especially politicians and political sycophants from both major parties saying that we need to, "Get tough with the world," and "show the world who's boss." Frankly, I'm deeply saddened and more than a little frightened that these people are blind to the harm that hawkish attitude has brought to our planet when applied as foreign policy around the globe.

It's too easy to confuse "almighty" with "most violent" or "most heavily armed," and when we do that it's too easy to forget that there are people – real flesh-and-blood people very much like you and me – on the receiving end of that violence.



Many years ago, when I was a senior in high school, a new student came to our school. Khalid was from Lebanon, and his family had moved to the United States to escape the war in their homeland. The civil war in Lebanon lasted from 1975 to 1990. 250,000 people were killed, countless more were injured, and another one million people left the country to avoid the fighting between the French-backed Christian government and Muslim forces, including the Palestine Liberation Organization.

I remember talking to Khalid about the difference between Wethersfield and Beirut. He said, "People here don't understand what it's like there. Kids here don't appreciate what they have,

and so many children in Lebanon are consumed by hatred for anyone connected to the Lebanese government, or those that support it, including Israel, Europe, and the United States.” He said, “They don’t know these people, but they hate them. They hate *you!* They are only children, and yet they are filled with hate, because their fathers have been killed in the fighting, or their homes have been destroyed by the bombing. They will *never* get over that.”

Think about that...an entire generation of Lebanese children scarred forever by a civil war orchestrated by the world’s “almighty” superpowers. 250,000 people killed, and each one left behind how many others to mourn his or her loss?

More recently, during the war in Iraq, conservative estimates say that at least 125,000 civilians were killed. And since American forces pulled out of Iraq in 2011, nearly 60,000 more civilians have died in fighting that continues to this day.

Since 2001, 31,000 civilians have died from fighting in Afghanistan, and another 41,000 have been injured.

Since 2011, it is estimated that nearly 100,000 civilians have died in the Syrian Civil War.

How many other lives have been ruined by each death caused by these wars? Even if only ten people’s lives were adversely affected by each of these deaths, it doesn’t take a genius to see that many, many millions of lives have been poisoned by the almighty hawks of war. Even if all the wars stopped today, it will take many, many generations for that poison to stop taking innocent lives.

This Old Testament way of dealing with those who aren’t like us is not working. This eye-for-an-eye, all-powerful way of dealing with others has only resulted in millions of people being hurt or killed, and there’s no end in sight. What’s even more frightening is that terrorist groups have vowed to bring the fighting to our homes, and to the homes of our allies. Being almighty hasn’t stopped the threat. Being almighty has only caused the threat to morph into new forms of evil that have changed our way of life forever.

A year ago, we saw horrible images of the body of a three-year-old Syrian refugee in his red shirt and blue shorts washed ashore in Turkey after the boat he was fleeing in capsized, and we cried out that this type of senseless death must stop. And then we went back to living our lives for another year, until we saw a video of a five-year-old boy being placed in an ambulance after being pulled from the rubble of his bombed apartment building. And once again we felt sick and cried out for justice for the children, and then we went back to our lives, and turned our backs on the problem, because he wasn’t *our* five-year-old boy, and it wasn’t *our* homes that had been bombed.

I don’t believe military might will ever solve the problems we have brought upon ourselves. Bombing our enemies doesn’t tame our enemies; bombing our enemies solidifies their hatred for us, and ensures that we will remain enemies for generations.

Sadly, I know in my heart that Jesus was right when he told us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies, but the almighty train of war has been chugging along for so long, and the idea that we are the almighty in the world has become so ingrained in our national psyche that I have absolutely no idea if the other cheek is still there for us to turn.

However, I do have hope, because on a small scale I've seen people choosing love and healing over the old ways of aggression, and I'd like to share the story of that hope with you. Believe it or not, this seed of hope has been planted in the Hartford Public School system, because we've finally come to realize that the old ways – the *almighty* ways – no longer work.



Hartford's Public Schools are instituting a practice called Restorative Justice to deal with discipline issues. Based on Native-American principles that are thousands of years old, Restorative Justice begins with the premise that when someone does wrong by you, you have three choices: get revenge, have retribution, or work for restoration.

Revenge is the Old Testament eye-for-an-eye method of taking justice into your own hands and returning every bad deed with another. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King, Jr.: that leaves all of us blind, and looking for more revenge.

Retribution is how our criminal-justice system works now. It is punitive, impersonal, and does not address the needs of the victim, the offender, or the community that was damaged.

Restoration promotes healing for both the victim and the offender, as well as for the greater society at large.

Eight months after instituting a program of Restorative Justice practices, one high school in Canada saw...

46% reduction in incidents of verbal abuse

60% reduction in incidents of physical abuse

43% reduction in incidents of disruptive behaviors

79% reduction in incidents of racist behaviors, and

65% reduction in total days of staff absences.



The model of restorative practices we have chosen to work with in our school is based on the book *Heart of Hope* by Carolyn Boyes-Watson. The premise of her work is that there are 7 Core Assumptions that are true about all human beings, and all restorative work must grow out of an understanding of these assumptions. I would like to propose today that every one of us consider making these assumptions our personal truth, because if we do, we'll never be able to look at our world the same way again. Remember: we hold these Core Assumptions to be true about every human being, everywhere. *Without exception.*

1. The true self in everyone is good, wise, and powerful.

This means that everyone has a "core" or "true" self that is good, wise, powerful, and always present. This core self cannot be destroyed. No matter what someone has done in the past, and no matter what has happened to him or her in the past, his or her core self remains as good, wise, and powerful as the day he or she was born.

2. The world is profoundly interconnected.

Every human being is related to all living creatures. This principle reminds us that there are no throw-away people. By harming anyone, we harm ourselves and the fabric of the entire world. What we do to others, we do to ourselves.

3. All human beings have a deep desire to be in a good relationship.

All people want to love and be loved, and all people want to be respected. This may not be what we show through our behavior, particularly when we have not been loved and respected by others, but at our core we all desire to be in good relationship with others.

4. All humans have gifts, and everyone is needed for what they bring.

Interdependence is essential for our survival. Different people are needed because different people see and do things differently. We require the contribution of diverse talents, personalities, and perspectives to find creative and innovative solutions to meet our needs.

5. Everything we need to make positive change is already here.

Human creativity and human commitment are our greatest treasure and greatest hope. There are rich reservoirs of talent and wisdom in each of us. If we fail to see the potential in one another, we deny our power to change the world.

6. Human beings are holistic.

Our minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits are in everything we do. They are equally important parts of us as human beings, and each provides ways of knowing, and sources of both wisdom and healing.

7. We need to build habits of living from the core self.

Only by connecting with our core self – a core that is good, wise, and powerful – can we live aligned with these values, which will enable us to build healthy relationships in our families, in our communities, and throughout our world.

Can you imagine how different this world might be if we all agreed to be intentional about creating new ways of living from these Core Assumptions? If we used these core values to guide our lives it would no longer be possible for any of us to close our hearts and minds to the pain and suffering of others. We can't hate anyone else if we believe everyone has a true self that is good, wise, and powerful. We can't kill if we understand that we are all profoundly interconnected and that through our killing we kill ourselves and our loved ones, too. This is a mindset from which true, lasting healing can take place.

The great power of these restorative principles is that they seamlessly align with every faith tradition, including Christianity.



I'm not naive. I know how hard it is to apply these principles to the situations we find ourselves facing today. But unless we bypass revenge and restitution and work to restore healthy relationships between *all* people, our world will never heal. And embracing these restorative practices is no harder than doing what Christ asks us to do as members of this Christian congregation.

We can no longer continue to call ourselves Christians and ignore the teachings of our Christ. While there is plenty of confusion in the Bible, there is no ambiguity in the message Jesus shared... turn the other cheek. Forgive. Love everyone.

The way I see it, we have two choices, and both *seem* impossible: Our first choice is that we learn to love our enemies. The other choice is to turn our backs on the very foundation of our church and admit that what Jesus calls us to do is unreasonable.

Today, I'm choosing to work very hard to become the Christian Jesus is calling me to be, because I have too much love for Jesus to profess my allegiance to him while living a life that ignores everything he calls me to be. If I'm going to fail, I'd rather fail trying to live up to the expectation Jesus has clearly set before me.



I'd like to close now by ending this message the way we close our sessions of Restorative Justice. In order to do so, I invite you to close your eyes and open your hearts to the love that abides in this holy place.

Begin by picturing yourself in your mind's eye, and silently repeat these words:

May I feel safe and protected.

May I feel peaceful.

May I feel love and compassion.

Now, keeping your eyes closed, think of someone who has been a benefactor or a mentor to you...

Picture that person in your mind, and silently offer him or her these words:

May you feel safe and protected.

May you feel peaceful.

May you feel love and compassion.

Now picture someone who has been a friend to you, and offer him or her these words:

May you feel safe and protected.

May you feel peaceful.

May you feel love and compassion.

Now imagine someone who has been difficult for you to deal with, or a challenge to you in some way, and offer him or her these words:

May you feel safe and protected.

May you feel peaceful.

May you feel love and compassion.

And now, understanding in our hearts that we are all interconnected, let's offer these words to everyone in the world:

May everyone in the world feel safe and protected.

May everyone in the world feel peaceful.

May everyone in the world feel love and compassion.



Gracious, loving God, meet us here, in this place of peace. Meet us now, in our uncertainty, as we struggle to reconcile your unconditional love for all beings with our limited understanding. Love us, teach us, and guide us, so that we might learn to truly love and care for everyone in the world, as Jesus called us to. Amen.