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Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, Hebrews 10:16-25, John 18:1 - 19:37

In the musical and now the movie Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, the nineteenth-century barber is manipulated by an evil judge so that he gets sent to a penal colony in Australia to do 15 years hard labor. When he gets back, Sweeney Todd vows revenge for the wrong that has been done to him. But, although the judge does come under Sweeney Todd's vengeful barber shears eventually, the demon barber first and evermore wreaks his revenge as well on dozens of "innocent" Londoners.

It's a classic story, just like in Homer's Iliad, of redirected aggression, the urge to "make someone pay" for what has been done to you. We even find redirected aggression in our comedy: remember the Three Stooges? We laughed when Larry walloped Curly just because Moe had walloped Larry. Scientists tell us that

if you put a rat in a cage with an electrified floor, and the rat is subjected to random shocks, the rat at first does anything it can to escape. Finding it has no power to change its terrible fate, it gives up and takes the shocks. Upon autopsy, the rat is found to have severely swollen adrenal glands and stomach ulcers. If you put a rat in the same cage but this time with a wooden stick to chew on, scientists find that it can endure the experience much longer. At autopsy, its adrenal glands are only slightly swollen, stomach ulcers fewer. Even though the rat cannot escape, chewing on the wooden stick provides an outlet for the stress. If you put two rats in the same cage and shock them both, they fight. The more you shock them, the more they fight. At autopsy, these rats' adrenal glands are normal, and there are no stomach ulcers. By passing their pain along to another individual, they protect themselves. Redirected aggression seems to have an evolutionary advantage. Although it seems horrible, it works.

And, terrifyingly, it translates into whole communities. It's commonly known that in neighborhoods under economic stress, crime goes up. In families under

extreme stress, the probably of domestic violence climbs. Entire nations are not immune to this. UN former chief weapons inspector Hans Blix has written,

“It is clear that the US determination to take on Iraq was not triggered by anything Iraq did, but by the wounds inflicted by Al-Qaeda.” End quote. America’s pain demanded an outlet. Someone had to be made to suffer to relieve America’s stress. Perhaps Iraq has been a success.

Here we are on Good Friday. You may be starting to see where I’m going with this. Jesus on the cross absorbed all the redirected aggression that had been building up for all time. Between the empire-builders and the oppressed, between brothers and sisters, between religious and non-religious, between God and humanity. It all just died there on the cross on Good Friday for the whole cosmos to see. All the pain of alienation, violence, and betrayal stopped right there. Jesus never went anywhere with it, he never passed it along to someone

else, but instead he gathered it in and took it down with him into his burial to be raised up on the third day.

University of Washington evolutionary biologist David Barash quotes GK

Chesterton and then goes on himself to write:

“Christianity hasn’t been tried and found wanting; rather, it has been found difficult and left untried. (that’s Chesterton!) (Now Barash) Never has that been more true than in cases of personal pain and our reaction to it. Thus, Jesus urged us to love our enemies, and if slapped, to turn the other cheek. But for millennia – before Jesus and after—human beings and their animal brethren have been far more likely to respond to pain and injury with a retaliating barrage of the same sort, generating yet more injury, more pain.

“Perhaps Jesus did not entirely appreciate the magnitude of the demand he was making upon *Homo sapiens*, because in asking his followers to refrain from retaliating – to absorb pain without passing it on to someone else—he was

asking people to inhibit one of their most widely shared, deep-seated inclinations.

Nonetheless,” Barash concludes, “Potential solutions are all based on an equally deep, equally shared truth: that human beings, perhaps unique among animals, are capable, at least on occasion, and once the issues are made clear, of acting against the promptings of our often troublesome [nature].”¹

And on Good Friday, of all days in the Christian year, we can agree that the issues have indeed been made very clear.

¹ Barash, David, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 5, 2007, p. B9.