

OCTOBER 26, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON “Peace of Mind—Revenge” Psalm 109:1-20, Matthew 18:21-22

This week we have the suggested subject to look into of revenge.

Simply put revenge is wanting to return harm for harm. You hurt me or someone I care about, therefore I want you to suffer in return. If I can have a hand in it all the better.

Before we go any further one distinction has to be made. Revenge and justice are not the same thing. In fact, I have the absolute utmost respect for people I’ve know that have struggled to make sure that line wasn’t crossed. There is a recognition that consequence is merited, but they want to make sure they aren’t acting or demanding something that is fueled by anger and a desire to see harm done. They recognize that they need to find the correct response, not necessarily the emotional one.

Justice is a warranted or fair consequence. I would also argue that when we’re talking about responding to harm or a wrong done there is another aspect to it. Justice doesn’t merely punish it seeks to correct. Therefore it is looking for a consequence that has the best chance of helping the perpetrator not repeat the offense. Revenge doesn’t do this. It seeks the hurt of the other and often the anger is such that it seeks to hurt more than what the original offense inflicted.

We see revenge in the Old Testament much moreso than the New. We also see that revenge meets with its own unfortunate consequences. Some notable examples:

Simeon and Levi slaughtered an entire city because a man named Schechem violated their sister Dinah. The result was that the inheritance of both tribes was squelched. Neither had a unified territory. They were cursed to be “divided”.

Absalom killed his brother Amnon after Amnon violated their sister Tamar. This led Absalom down a road of aggression and violence that resulted in his death at the hands of Joab, David’s trusted general.

Joab was as vengeful as they come. He killed Abner in revenge for Abner taking his brother Asahel’s life in battle. He killed Absalom in revenge for all the trouble he brought on David. He killed Amasa in revenge for taking his job as the head of the army. Ultimately Solomon had him killed because of his violent history and trying to keep Solomon off the throne.

Perhaps all of this is why we have the famous passage that says “vengeance is mine says the Lord.” When we take it there never seems to be a good end result.

Vengeance though was part of the culture then. Why would you kill every living person in a battle or conquest? So no one would return later in revenge.

Then we have the Psalms. The Psalms have plenty of moments where the writer is asking God to rain down judgment on someone who has offended them. The Psalm read this morning is absolutely this. It is a plea for God to bring revenge on behalf of the writer. “I was hurt and I want them hurt...bad!”

As unfortunate as all of this is, it should be a little comforting. If you’ve ever been angry and felt the need for revenge you aren’t alone. In fact it’s as common as can be with us as people. It’s natural to be angry at whomever hurts us. It’s also natural to want payback.

The problem is that entertaining this raises up a miserable spirit. It is the stuff of grudges, hatefulness, and bitterness that never leaves. It is the cause of feuds that last weeks, years, and sometimes generations. It also destroys our witness.

I remember back in the 90s working in Pittsburgh that gang violence was particularly bad. They had to bring in outside mediators to meet with leaders to try and settle things down. Part of this landed on a 15 year old boy on my caseload. I came into work and found that the night before he’d been shot in the chest and killed in a gunfight with a rival gang.

This was the mentality. You hurt us, we hurt you. Then you hurt us and we hurt you over and over again.

While most of us haven’t personally been involved in something this brutal, we have seen cycles of this kind of revenge or getbacks.

It can be neverending, and part of the reason is that the mentality ignores personal responsibility. I’m not responsible for hurting you because you hurt me first. And I can go back to that well over and over again to let myself off the hook. If I get in trouble for the revenge I take, maybe a fine, jail, lost job, lost friends, whatever, it’s not my fault. It’s yours. I wouldn’t have had to do the thing if you hadn’t hurt me so if you hadn’t hurt me I wouldn’t have the consequence.

1 John tells us that whomever says they have no sin is a liar and the truth isn't in him. That's this. I refuse to admit wrongdoing because I always dump it on whomever I feel offended by.

Revenge is a poison. It's not just a poison to the ones we hurt it's poison to ourselves because it brings out the worst in us. The focus is on harming not healing. And we entertain those dark parts in our heart because we feel entitled to them. It corrodes our peace and our relationship with God.

Jesus has a very different way of approaching the moments that bring revenge to the surface of our hearts and minds.

He says things like "love your enemies." "Pray for those who persecute you." Our passage today is a disciple trying to find a loophole. "How many times do I have to forgive? 7?" Jesus replies "70 times 7." In other words as many times as we've been hurt we forgive.

For myself I think about the times I've wanted to withhold forgiveness because whatever was done to me was "so terrible." How humbling is it to look at a cross and be reminded that Jesus forgave the ones who put Him there even as He hung there dying in agony? It makes me feel pretty small sometimes by comparison.

Jesus says to "turn the other cheek". This is about retaliation. Return offense for offense. Insult for insult. It goes nowhere other than an endless cycle of hurt if we give into it.

Romans tells us not to return evil for evil but to repay evil with good.

It also tells us that as much as it's up to us live in peace with everyone. This is telling. "As long as it's up to you". In other words we can't do a thing about someone else's actions. All we can do is see that our lives, words, and deeds are in keeping with the peace, forgiveness, and mercy of Jesus.

The whole idea is to become people of radical forgiveness. When justice is required, it's done with a greater purpose in mind. My emotion and revenge aren't a factor. It's about what is fair and what will bring about the greatest tomorrow for everyone.

So much of what I preach about is communal, but this is intensely personal. Cultivating a spirit that abandons revenge for grace and mercy is how we free ourselves. We free ourselves from the bitterness and anger that steals our peace, our joy, and destroys relationships that are dear to us.

It is about having a heart that has come to truly appreciate that grace I have received from God. I am forgiven. I don't have to worry about the wrath of God because I've received grace. I'm not waiting for some vengeance from the sky.

If I have truly, truly, placed my faith in Christ and let this love penetrate my heart I have no other option than to extend that mercy and grace to those who have wronged me.

There is, however, a bigger picture to it as well. It's rethinking the sense that "vengeance is the Lord's". I've heard people encouraged to "give it to the Lord" and the intention is that God can wreck someone in revenge far more effectively than I can.

The problem is that my heart is still vengeful. I'm just waiting to see that hurt done by someone else. I've heard people told when it's taking too long to "be patient" and trust that God will "get them" in due time. Of course the longer I have to wait the longer the anger and bitterness builds in my heart. And I may never see the lightning bolt hit them.

In the end, is that really what we want?

Our desire is to be seeing people come to faith. Our desire is to see lives transformed to become more like Christ's for the good of the person and the good of the world. What should my desire be? To see my selfish anger satisfied or to see a life transformed?

If I ask God to intervene it should look like working in that person's life to help them come to faith and a life imitating Jesus. To see their callous change to compassion, their anger and hate to love, their pride to humility, their greed to gratitude and grace. According to Christ it seems this is what God is seeking as well.

What better revenge can we get over evil than to see evil turned to the goodness of God?

What better revenge than seeing someone who has spread evil turn that same energy to spreading gospel good? If they are anything like the apostle Paul they'll double their energy toward the good that they once spent on evil.

When we talk about freedom in Christ this is what we are getting at. If we embrace the way of Jesus, we are freed from being bound by our anger, revenge, and desires to inject more hurt into the world. It is replaced by peace, love, forgiveness, and the desire to inject more of that into the world.

This is the light burden of Jesus. It is a light heart. A light spirit. A contented mind.

It is also the light that the world needs now more than ever to push back a divisive darkness. Instead we are called to join together to find a common peace.

It begins in each individual heart. I want to remind you that whatever you feel is hanging over your head, God can forgive you. God loves you. God's grace is available to you. It is God's great joy to offer all of it. How much joy is ours when we do the same to one another?

TOUGH QUESTION: What about the whole original sin thing?

The answer is rooted far more in history and the discussion in church doctrine than scripture. The basic sense of this doctrine is that every human being has inherited a basic sin or sinful nature because of Adam. So we are all liable to judgment even from birth.

Just as points of thought, here are a few considerations.

This posits that Adam is the one guilty of bringing sin into the world, not Eve. Romans talks about “sin being brought into the world by one man.” Not one woman, one man. While Eve “took the first bite”, Adam is the one blamed.

Why is this significant? Through the ages women have been demonized for Eve’s giving into the temptation. Women have been dominated and submitted as a result, associating the guilt of sin with her. Scripture on the other hand lays it on Adam. There’s more to unpack there, but for the question this thought nugget will suffice.

The other assumption is that it was the devil at fault for the temptation. Nowhere in scripture is this stated. This was imposed later by Christians looking to source out the temptation. Whatever later Christians may have said, it isn’t in the Bible.

Another question afoot is the literal nature of the story. Early on in the forming church there was questioning about whether Genesis was intended literally or figuratively as a lesson in myth form. The literalist is more inclined to work towards original sin in Adam’s mistake passed along. The figurative might simply take the story as a tale revealing the eternal truth that humans have always had the opportunity to choose right and wrong. Even not knowing the difference eventually we will make a mistake and choose wrong.

The idea of original sin also has born an impact on baptism. Early Christians that believed in this doctrine, along with a belief that baptism was essential for salvation, led to the understanding that without an immediate baptism even infants were doomed. This is why many Christians today, even non-Catholics rush for baptism after birth. The superstition that not doing so would lead to damnation.

This urgency developed because in much earlier times the risk of an infant dying was much much higher than it is today. Ensuring salvation in the fear of damnation was a domination reality.

The importance of original sin not only led to interpretation of sin, but also of baptism which we’ve come to understand differently in many traditions. Baptism itself has led to deadly conflicts within Christianity itself and division that have spawned new denominations.

The point being that believing that every human is stained with sin from birth leaves a significant mark on interpreting scripture. We don’t let scripture speak on its own, but rather impose our doctrine on scripture, telling it what to say.

For example, many argue that original sin is why Jesus was conceived of a virgin. The problem is that the doctrine of original sin wasn’t formed fully until almost 300 years after the gospels writing the virgin birth were... written? birthed? It couldn’t have been a factor.

Instead, apart from believing the literal sense of a virgin birth, communicating it was much more important. Matthew and Luke were writing to people perhaps unfamiliar with firsthand understanding of Jesus. They needed to let them know from the beginning Who they were writing about. The virgin birth was a symbol of a divine child. This was known to the people of the time. So it signaled that this story wasn’t to be trifled with. It was about not just a man, but a God.

The original sin piece comes into play with the “immaculate conception”. This wasn’t the conception of Jesus, rather it was the conception of Mary. In order for Jesus to not have original sin He must have been conceived by a woman without original sin. So Mary must have been divinely conceived. Therefore her other as well was a virgin at her birth.

In fact, there is a chapel in the Holy Lands to Mary’s mother for precisely this tradition.

The question of “well what about Mary’s mother’s mother?” was asked in study. Ultimately that isn’t fully answered. Fortunately, there is an answer...sort of.

Original sin, as it goes, is conveyed through the emitted “fluid” of the man. In other words, Adam’s bodily fluid inseminating Eve is what holds the stain of sin. So the sin is conveyed through the “fluid” of the man. Therefore no fluid, no original sin.

If this sounds like we’re getting into the weeds here, I agree. We are talking about genetics that the ancient world knew nothing about.

So let’s get a little more specific. Outside Genesis, one of the main scriptures prompting the idea of original sin was and is Romans 5. Specifically that “just as sin entered the world through one man, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned...” The idea is that Adam was the beginning of sin and therefore everyone

since is stained with that guilt and promise that we can't avoid sin.

While there are many that founded and inspired the church that could be cited, two are of the most import, Augustine and Pelagius.

Pelagius in a nutshell is a sort of father to the idea of free will in extreme form. It was his sense that every moment of life was based in choice from birth. In every moment we have the possibility to choose the right. Therefore, followed logically, every person has the possibility to be perfect if they choose perfectly every time.

This, of course, is an impossible possibility. Yes, it's a logical possibility on paper. Unfortunately our imperfection and track record shows that we will all make mistakes. Scripture bears this out in 1 John as "anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar and the truth is not in them." Nevertheless, at the very least, the possibility exists.

In other words, we are not guilty at birth. We have the opportunity, much like the student whose teacher says "you have an A+, it's yours to lose" at the beginning of the year, to do it all right. Sadly perfection isn't in the cards. Free will, temptation, and our human nature eventually will scar that record.

For Augustine, and many others, this wasn't an option. Every person is already born guilty. One of the suggested causes is that he was working off of a mistranslation of Romans 5:12. The difference? All are being in death "because all sinned" where his translation said that regarding Adam "in him (meaning Adam) all sinned". Therefore every person from Adam sinned and was therefore guilty from the moment of birth. As a result of Augustine's influence, many interpreted the context of that verse in light of original sin, even in its more correct form.

There are more arguments at stake here. Is the soul something pure and unique to the individual? Is it "prestained" because the souls is a product of the souls of the parents and therefore transmitted from the first person forward? Is free will absolute or is it tainted by Adam as a point of origin? Even more basic is the story of Adam literal or a metaphor containing spiritual truth if not necessarily historical?

These questions aren't the point of this "tough question", but they are raised as a matter of pondering original sin.

The reality is that scripture is interpreted many ways. Original sin is a doctrine of many traditions in the church. It isn't original to the earliest church. It wasn't until at earliest three and half centuries after Christ that it was incorporated into belief. And even then it was and is still debated.

Where do I come down? Good question. I don't believe any of us are liable for sin we didn't commit, even Adam's. I also believe that as imperfect creatures we are sadly unable to avoid sinning. Mistakes are an affliction common to all of us, citing the 1 John scripture I mentioned earlier. The problem isn't that I was born already guilty. The problem is that I was born with the incredible gift and responsibility to choose every step of my life's journey. Self interest and error will always win at some point and so I will "miss the mark", I will sin. If not guilty at birth, I will soon be by my own design.

Thank God for the sacrifice of Christ. That grace covers me, and His example gives me an example to follow. The closer I follow Him, hopefully the less I will miss the mark and the more I will live a life in the fullest light of God.