

God's Strong Lamb.

*When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared,
"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

I think people have long believed that, in any conflict, the winner was the person who was still standing when all was said and done. Well, that may be true in a lot of cases, but today's reading from John's gospel tells us that this perception is not always correct. For example, last Sunday afternoon, as their game came to a close, the Dallas *Cowboys* may not have scored the most points against the New York *Giants* (those purveyors of evil and wickedness), but they certainly took the moral victory. Amen! But even if you don't think, like I do, that this is a good example, the author of John's gospel still wants to assure us that it's not always easy to distinguish the winners from the losers.

During the time of Jesus, the gods that many of the non-Christians worshiped were those which they believed to be strong. And a strong god was one that could not only wreak havoc in the lives of those with whom they were angry, but also bring great rewards to those with whom they were pleased. And the common sense reasoning behind this was the simple notion that, if a god wasn't strong enough to do good things for us, what's the point of worshiping him?

Even the Jews had a long history of serving One whom they believed to be a strong God. Their God had titles like The Most High, and The Supreme One, and The Lord of Hosts. (This last title refers to the general over a vast army.) And the Most High was indeed a strong god. And the Supreme One was a powerful god. The Lord of Hosts was a warrior who carried out his will by any means necessary.

Well, notwithstanding the fact that (a) Christianity came out of Judaism, and (b) that both religions shared the same God, one of the things that kept many people from converting to Christianity in its early days, was the perception that the God of the Christians was weak. And who could blame people for coming to this conclusion? The Christian's God came to Earth, but was apparently unable to overcome the forces of this world, and was executed like any other common criminal. So, who wants to worship a God who is an apparent loser? Who wants to serve a God who can't even save himself? Because, if he can't save himself from the Cross, what hope can I have that he'll ever be able to save me, when I have my own cross to bear?

So, when John the Baptist announces that Jesus was the "Lamb of God," he was making an almost unthinkable statement, because of the perception that people had, in those days, of lambs. Sheep were thought to be the stupidest animals on the face of the earth. Now, if you had talked to me yesterday, I would have told you about stupid animals. After all, what am I supposed to think when my dog would rather play outside in the snow when it's a mere six degrees above zero, rather than curl up on the sofa in the living room, where it's nice and warm.

Dumb, right? However, I'm reminded of something that Jules Winnfield, one of the main characters in that American cult classic, *Pulp Fiction*, once said regarding dogs, "But a dog's got personality. And personality goes a long way." So, I guess I'm willing to give Jack a pass on this one. But sheep are another thing altogether. Without a shepherd to provide them with food, water, and protection, they would not survive on their own. And when you consider the fact that a lamb is younger, and even more dependent upon the shepherd, it doesn't take a genius to connect the dots and come to the conclusion that comparing your Savior – the Son of the Most High God – to a lamb, was tantamount to theological suicide. Admittedly, some might concede the point that, at many times in the past, God exhibited tenderness and mercy. But he is still a warrior, and not a lamb!

So, what's going on? With two thousand years of history and theology under our belts, we can see that the author of John's gospel was not speaking in literal terms. In fact, we're pretty sure that this author was looking ahead to the death of Jesus on the Cross, and drawing a comparison between the death of Jesus and the death of all those lambs who died on Jewish altars. And the point that he was trying to make was that the end-result of each was essentially the same: to compensate for our sins. I think it's clear that the author of John's gospel is telling us this much. But I think he's telling us much more.

What I believe the author of John's gospel also wants us to see, is that Jesus is the surrogate sufferer. He wants us to understand that Jesus was willing to be sacrificed on our behalf, in order to restore our relationship with God. Rather than demanding that we sacrifice ourselves, to make amends for all the bad stuff we did to God, God was willing to sacrifice himself.

Now, the big question is: Why did God do this? After all the bad stuff that people have done to God – and our Old Testament is replete with examples of how the people of God could screw things up – why would God bear the brunt of our well-deserved punishment? Well, at one level, he's certainly taking his own advice, and turning the proverbial "other cheek." But I think that there's more to it.

I think God understood that returning evil for evil simply doesn't work. Sure, punishing an evil-doer may feel good, and it may seem like the right thing to do. But I think that God understood that, in the long run, violence usually only begets more violence. Since you hurt me, I'll hurt you. To quote the Old Testament book of Exodus (21:23-25), if serious injury is done to you,

"you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

At the time of its writing, that advice probably sounded pretty good, and, in fact, it was a step forward from an even older dictum that demanded a *life* for an eye. But history has proven that the pattern of violence-following-after-violence becomes its own self-sustaining cycle. That is, unless someone decides to stop the cycle. Unless the power of evil, and the momentum that

violence generates, is taken on, and defeated through love. I believe God realized that the chain of violence had to stop, and the only way to stop it was to love it to death. To love it *by* death. It's as the author of John's gospel says later,

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

In other words, Jesus' death enabled the restoration of our relationship with God. And, more, it also opened the door to the restoration of our relationships with others. Remember when Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” And he probably thought he was being pretty generous! Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus' death was God's unqualified declaration that our broken relationships with each other *can* be healed, and that virtually nothing should stand in the way of that healing. The example that God gave us, and the extent to which he was willing to go to heal his relationship with us, is an example that we are to employ in our relationships with each other.

Society may tell us that, when violence is done to us, when relationships have been broken, when trusts have been violated, the best and most appropriate response is to respond to the offender in a similar fashion. But Jesus, the Lamb of God, showed us that, sometimes, there is no price too high to pay to restore that relationship.

In the end, experience has shown us that the winner in a conflict is not necessarily that one whom we find still standing when the dust has settled. That singular death on Good Friday certainly proves that! He wasn't the one still standing when the sun set on that day. He wasn't the winner by human standards. But he was certainly the victor by the standards of history, because the example he left for the generations to follow still lives on. And, he was the victor because he was motivated, first and foremost by love. It's just like that Danish poet, Piet Hein, once wrote:

Giving in is no defeat.
Passing on is no retreat.
Selves are made to rise above.
You shall live in what you love.

The example we are called to be for each other, is that of someone who is quick to forgive, is that of someone who is willing to take the extra steps to mend fences, is that of someone who willing to take a loss now in order to gain a victory later. This is also the legacy that we are called to leave for who follow after us: That, in search of a greater good, the occasional surrender may be the smartest choice we can make. And, that our choosing to be a lamb occasionally, rather than a warrior always, may be the most loving decision of all.