

Feeding the Wolf

Psalm 33: 13-20
James 4:1-3
Matthew 5: 1-9

Elon Community Church
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Father David McBriar is a Franciscan friar who served as priest at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Raleigh for some years. He likes to tell the following story about that congregation's patron saint. It is the legend of how St. Francis taught the people of Gubbio to feed their wolf.

Many, many years ago, the people of a little Italian town named Gubbio had a problem. The bloody remains of some of their townsfolk began showing up on the streets of their beautiful city when people awoke in the morning. Since the people of Gubbio were very proud, they were convinced that a stranger passing through their village must be responsible for these terrible crimes. They began to lock their doors at night. When more deaths followed, the same denial: no one in Gubbio could be responsible for such a thing!

Then, someone saw a wolf wandering the streets one night after everyone had retired. The people of Gubbio realized that this wolf must live in the dark woods on one side of the city. Of course, this could not be their wolf because they never asked this creature to come to Gubbio. Immediately, they began to find ways to dispatch him. After a number of futile attempts, the people got desperate enough to approach the holy man of Assisi who had a reputation for being able "to talk to animals". St. Francis agreed to help and met with the wolf while the people waited anxiously. When he returned from this conversation, he gave the people some strange and not entirely welcome advice.

He told the citizens of Gubbio that they must "feed" their wolf. At first, the people were not impressed with this suggestion and began to wonder why they had ever approached the holy man in the first place. But then, something miraculous happened. Bit by bit, people began to leave food out for the wolf as he prowled the streets of Gubbio. The violent deaths ceased, and it was not long before every man, woman and child had learned how to "feed the wolf." As a result, the people of Gubbio were transformed. They became less arrogant, more concerned about others, and more able to recognize their own shortcomings.

Today, I find myself wondering about the wolves within all of us. They are the parts of ourselves that are alien, misunderstood, and even threatening to us.

Since September 11th, we have seen a dangerous tendency to externalize evil. We project it on terrorists, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Hamas, Afghanistan, and Iraqi insurgents. The lines are drawn, the players engage in battle, and we, of course, have the moral high ground because we are not violent, murderous creatures by nature. Those characteristics belong to the enemy.

But as Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The wolf is in our own village. And, when I allow myself to absorb this uncomfortable truth, I realize the wolf prowls in my very own heart.

Carl Jung, the famous psychologist and philosopher, said, "The psychology of the individual is reflected in the psychology of the nation... Only a change of attitude in the individual can initiate a change in the psychology of the nation." (*C. G. Jung, "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology", Vol. 7, Collected Works, p.4*)

Like the proud people of Gubbio, we find it difficult to acknowledge our own wolves. As Charles Hanna writes in his book, *The Face of the Deep*, “We cannot stand the sight of our dark side, so we repress it, push it under, thinking we have thereby disposed of it. But we have not. We have simply pushed it into a place where it both has us in its grip and automatically projects itself on the person or the nation we do not like; so the tension we will not stand in ourselves is carelessly and irresponsibly cast out to increase the tension and strife and anguish of our world.”

(Elizabeth O'Connor, *Our Many Selves*, 1971, p.73.)

Acknowledging the wolf in my own heart is an ongoing and difficult piece of work. Self-reflection is not something that comes easy. But, occasionally I try to look at my own shadow selves, the ones I tend to repress and project on others. What do I see? Well, for one thing, it's quite easy for me to be annoyed by all those sensitive, quick to take offense folks...you know, the ones who are easily wounded by innocent remarks and nurse grudges until hell freezes over. Hmm...Surely, I don't have any such traits myself? It's just that these other people are so darn irritating to be around!

So, yes, I guess the wolf in my own heart is alive and well. It is just so much easier to see him in someone else's village. In the legend about St. Francis and the people of Gubbio, the wise man tells the townspeople to do a thing that seems totally strange and incomprehensible. Instead of chasing down the wolf with spears or trying to trap and kill it, they are to feed it. It is not through violence that the violence in their streets will end.

What they must do is counterintuitive. But, if they acknowledge the wolf and feed it, they set in place a process whereby the wolf ceases to need to kill. And when the killings stop, the villagers are humbler and wiser. The story doesn't say, but it could be that the wolf even becomes somewhat tame, or at least, understood.

In Cherokee culture, the wolf is a supremely important animal. He is both respected and feared. His hunting skills are formidable, but the people tell stories of learning from him and even asking for his help in times of trouble.

How do we “feed the wolf”? What must we do as a church, a nation, a culture? It certainly seems that as a country we cannot talk about peace without acknowledging and feeding the shadow selves of our own nation. We can't talk about the evil of terrorists in other lands while condoning torture for prisoners in secret jails. We can't castigate another country for desiring nuclear power when we have more nuclear weaponry than anyone else on earth. What will it take for us to take psychological responsibility for our own national wolves and stop projecting them onto others?

The author of the epistle of James says it well: “Where do these wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn't it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven't got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force.”

But the psalmist answers, “No king succeeds with a big army alone, no warrior wins by brute strength. Horsepower is not the answer; no one gets by on muscle alone.”

As Christians, it is right for us to ask, “What would Jesus do?” Well, it's not too hard to figure that out. In looking at his society's political system of legalized vengeance, Jesus imagined a different world. He declared,

“God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.” And then later in the Sermon on the Mount, he continues: "You have learned that they were told, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth.' But what I tell you is this: 'Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two.' (Mt 5: 9,38-41).

Jesus, like St. Francis, was essentially showing us how to counter violence with a process that would lead to lasting peace. Acknowledge your own baggage. Don't look for the speck in your brother's eye without noticing the beam in your own. And don't get sucked into repaying evil with evil.

On 17 November 1957, about a year before I was born, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a sermon on “Loving Your Enemies” at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Let me read to you just a part of what he said that day:

It's not only necessary to know how to go about loving your enemies, but also to go down into the question of why we should love our enemies. I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus' thinking, is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe.

If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil.

King then went on to tell a personal story. This is what he said:

I think I mentioned before that sometime ago my brother and I were driving one evening to Chattanooga, Tennessee, from Atlanta. He was driving the car. And for some reason the drivers were very discourteous that night. They didn't dim their lights; hardly any driver that passed by dimmed his lights.

And I remember very vividly, my brother A. D. looked over and in a tone of anger said: "I know what I'm going to do. The next car that comes along here and refuses to dim the lights, I'm going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all of their power."

And I looked at him right quick and said: "Oh no, don't do that. There'd be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody has got to have some sense on this highway!"

Somebody must have sense enough to dim the lights, and that is the trouble, isn't it? That as all of the civilizations of the world move up the highway of history, so many civilizations, having looked at other civilizations that refused to dim the lights, they decided to refuse to dim theirs."

Martin Luther King, of course, went on to advocate for the power of love and the creative tactic of nonviolent resistance as the appropriate response to hatred and anger and violence. He is a joined by a host of other pacifists from all religions.

How easy it is to justify or vindicate force when it is used on our behalf. How tempting it is to believe that violence is necessary to justify a good end.

We might spank a child and rationalize that it will make her more compliant. We don't like war, but we try to convince ourselves that it is a necessary evil, that it will make us safer. We know that handguns kill many innocent lives every year, but we don't support laws to strictly limit their purchase because we believe they are required for self-defense.

We all have our wolves, our propensity for swift and awful attacks. Even Jesus' disciples, those who had been with him to hear his constant message of loving one's enemies, reacted instinctively when he was arrested by the Pharisees in the garden of Gethsemane.

"Shall we use our swords"? they cry to Jesus, and one slashes at the adversaries in the dark and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Surely, this was justified self-defense! But, Jesus cut it short. "Leave off!" He called to them. "That's enough!" and he reached out to touch and heal the wound of the enemy. He refused to condone any kind of retribution. Jesus knew that one holding a sword always believes he has just cause, and that violence without intervention is never ending.

How do we intervene? How do we become peacemakers? What are the ways to acknowledge and tame the wolves who prowl in our own hearts and country? Since this sermon began with a story about St. Francis, I want to close with another story about this gentle saint.

About three years ago, I had a strange but wonderful errand. My friend and colleague at the Council of Churches, Barbara Zelter, had just lost her father. As an expression of our concern and sympathy, the rest of us on staff wanted to offer her an unusual gift, a statue of St. Francis that used to belong to one of our former colleagues on the Council staff, Sister Evelyn Mattern, who had died a few years earlier. Evelyn had left behind a quaint log house in Youngsville which was lying empty, the garden overgrown with weeds.

Evelyn's niece, the present owner of the property who lived out of state, had come by to check on things a few days earlier and had noticed a garden statue of St. Francis amidst all the dirt and vines. When she heard about Barbara's recent loss of her father, she suggested that one of us on the Council staff come out to Evelyn's old place, pick up St. Francis, and offer him to Barbara in honor of the gentle spirit that was her Dad. Barbara could place the saint under the tree in her backyard garden.

Thinking this an excellent idea, we all agreed, and I volunteered to drive out to Youngsville to pick up the saint. Being about three feet tall and made of cement, he was quite heavy. He was chipped and crumbling in places, and dirt and leaf mold covered his feet. However, his face still held a kind smile, and his hands reached out with flowers. I laid him carefully in my trunk and drove home.

Now, since Barbara was out of town and I couldn't immediately deliver the statue to its new home, I had the strange experience of driving around for the next few days with St. Francis in my trunk. Actually, it was a comforting feeling, as I stopped at traffic lights and zipped through busy intersections, remembering that he was there, deep within my own vehicle.

And so when I think about the truth embedded in the old legend about the people of Gubbio, I am also struck by another truth. Our hearts may harbor wolves, but they can also give refuge to peacemaking saints. We have a bit of St. Francis in each one of us. Some would call it the image of God.

Jesus urges us to raise up that part of our souls from our trunks, dust them off, and place them in places where they can be seen. We must claim peacemaking as our own work. And work it is.

Loving our enemies means trying to know and understand them. And of course, it's impossible to understand others, if we don't know ourselves.

So, for my part, I will look a little harder at the wolf in my heart, study its habits, see its identifying marks. But, I will also claim the St. Francis that lies deep within me as well, chipped, damaged, but smiling and offering flowers.

I know they are both there. And somehow, when they speak to one another, they can offer peace to others.

O God, make us instruments of your peace. Amen.