
VIGILANTE VENGEANCE

“They do not know what they are doing” Luke 23:34.

Thirty-seven years old. Thin, almost frail. Balding and bespectacled. An electronics buff. Law-abiding and timid. Certainly not a description you would give a vigilante. Certainly not the person you would cast to play Robin Hood or the Lone Ranger.

But that didn't bother the American public. When Bernard Hugo Goetz blasted four would-be muggers in a New York subway, he instantly became a hero. A popular actress sent him a “love and kisses” telegram, “Thug-buster” T-shirts began to appear on the streets of New York City. A rock group wrote a song in his honour. People gave and raised money to go toward his defense. Radio talk shows were deluged with callers. “They won't let it go,” said one radio host.

It's not hard to see why.

Bernard Goetz was an American fantasy come true. He did what every citizen wants to do. He fought back. He “kicked the bully in the shins.” He “punched the villain in the nose.” He “clobbered evil over the head.” This unassuming hero embodied a nationwide, even worldwide anger: a passion for revenge.

The outpouring of support gives clear evidence. People are mad. People are angry. There is a pent-up, boiling rage that causes us to toast a man who fearlessly (or fearfully) says, “I ain't taking it no more!” and then comes out with a hot pistol in each hand.

We're tired. We're tired of being bullied, harassed, and intimidated. We're weary of the serial murderer, rapists, and hired assassins.

We're angry at someone, but we don't know who. We're scared of something, but we don't know what. We want to fight back, but we don't know how. And then, when a modern-day Wyatt Earp walks into the scene, we applaud him. He is speaking for us! “That-a-way to go, Thug-Buster; that's the way to do it!:

Or is it? Is that really the way to do it? Let's think about our anger for just a minute.

Anger. It's a peculiar yet predictable emotion. It begins as a drop of water. An irritant. A frustration. Nothing big, just an aggravation. Someone gets your parking place. Someone pulls in front of you on the freeway. A waitress is slow and you are in a hurry. The toast burns. Drops of water. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Yet, get enough of these seemingly innocent drops of anger and before long you've got a bucket full of rage. Walking revenge. Blind bitterness. Unharnessed hatred. We trust no one and bare our teeth at anyone who gets near. We become walking time bombs that, given just the right tension and fear, could explode like Mr. Goetz.

Now, is that any way to live? What good has hatred ever brought? What hope has anger ever created? What problems have ever been resolved by revenge?

No one can blame the American public for applauding the man who fought back. Yet, as the glamour fades on such acts, reality makes us ask questions: What good was done? Is that really the way to reduce the crime rate? Are subways forever safer? Are the streets now free of fear? No. Anger doesn't do that. Anger only feeds a primitive lust for revenge that feeds our anger that feeds our revenge that feeds our anger – you get the picture. Vigilantes are not the answer.

Yet, what do we do? We can't deny that our anger exists. How do we harness it? A good option is found in Luke 23:34. Here, Jesus speaks about the mob that killed him. "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Have you ever wondered how Jesus kept from retaliating? Have you ever asked how he kept his control? Here's the answer. It's the second part of his statement "for they do not know what they are doing." Look carefully. It's as if Jesus considered this bloodthirsty, death-hungry crowd not as murderers, but as victims. It's as if he saw in their faces not hatred but confusion. It's as if he regarded them not as a militant mob but, as he put it, as "sheep without a shepherd."

"They don't know what they are doing."

And when you think about it, they didn't. They hadn't the faintest idea what they were doing. They were a stir-crazy mob, mad at something they couldn't see so they took it out on, of all people, God. But they didn't know what they were doing.

And for the most part, neither do we. We are still, as much as we hate to admit it, shepherdless sheep. All we know is that we were born out of one eternity and are frighteningly close to another. We play tag with the fuzzy realities of death and pain. We can't answer our own questions about love and hurt. We can't solve the riddle of aging. We don't know how to heal our own bodies or get along with our own mates. We can't keep ourselves out of war. We can't even keep ourselves fed.

Paul spoke for humanity when he confessed, "I do not know what I am doing."¹

Now, I know that doesn't justify anything. That doesn't justify hit-and-run drivers or kiddie-porn peddlers or heroin dealers. But it does help explain why they do the miserable things they do.

My point is this: Uncontrolled anger won't better our world, but sympathetic understanding will. Once we see the world and ourselves for what we are, we can help. Once we understand ourselves we begin to operate not from a posture of anger but of compassion and concern. We look at the world not with bitter frowns but with extended hands. We realize that the lights are out and a lot of people are stumbling in the darkness. So we light our candles.

As Michaelangelo said, "we criticize by creating." Instead of fighting back we help out. We go to the ghettos. We teach in the schools. We build hospitals and help orphans ... and we put away our guns.

"They do not know what they are doing."

There is something about understanding the world that makes us want to save it, even to die for it. Anger? Anger never did anyone any good. Understanding? Well, the results are not as quick as the vigilante's bullet, but they are certainly much more constructive.

¹ Romans 7:15, author's paraphrase