

Hate Cannot Drive Out Hate

This is not the sermon I expected to be giving this week. As late as Thursday afternoon, I expected to be preaching today on the story of the Good Samaritan, which is this week's Gospel reading in the lectionary, and on the week's Old Testament reading in Deuteronomy, which I felt complemented the parable. I was aware, of course, of the latest furor over black men shot to death by police officers and I was thinking that next week's lectionary would give me an appropriate opportunity to address those tragedies. The scripture I had in mind is Amos 8:1-12 which I preached from just three years ago to address the "not guilty" verdict in the case of George Zimmerman, the killer of Trayvon Martin. But the events of Thursday night changed my mind. The rash of violence that erupted that evening and carried over into Friday convinced me that I needed to change my plans. I felt that it would be irresponsible of me not to address the ugly mood of violence and vengeance that I saw, not only in the news but even from friends on Facebook. Although I strongly suspect that I am, as the saying goes, preaching to the choir here at Good Shepherd Baptist, I am also convinced that it is my duty to speak today on the Biblical perspective of events like this. What is God's response to human violence and what is the appropriate response of the Body of Christ?

Although modern weaponry allows for the faster slaughter of our sisters and brothers by our sisters and brothers, the issue of human vs. human violence is far from a new problem. The creation stories of Genesis tell how violence erupted in the first family between the brothers Cain and Abel. When God sees Cain's anger before the fatal event, God warns the young man: "Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Nevertheless, Cain kills his brother and is banished. Nor do later humans learn the lesson of Cain. In the Genesis version of the great flood story, God passes judgment on human beings because "the earth is filled with violence because of them."

God continues to instruct God's people against violence in the most basic rules for how to live a life pleasing to God. "Thou shalt not kill" is perhaps the best known of what we call the Ten Commandments. Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk has cited a modern Jewish translation of Leviticus 19:16 — "do not stand idle while your neighbor's blood is spilled." From the creation stories to the Law to the words of the prophets, God makes clear that violence is not a part of the divine plan. Remember the image in Isaiah of the vineyard: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

Our first text this morning is part of this rich tradition of anti-violence teaching in the Old Testament. The tradition, of course, is so full because violence continued to be a problem for the Children of Israel just as much as it is a problem for the United States today. The vision of Habakkuk begins, in the time-honored tradition of God's people, with the prophet complaining to God. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?" Habakkuk didn't have to deal with snipers or trigger-happy cops or assault rifles but he still saw, as other prophets did, how a government that spent more time on pampering the rich than on providing for the poor had allowed the basest instincts of the populace to run riot. In Habakkuk's words, "the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted." In the second part of that reading for this morning, from chapter two, God acknowledges the problem: "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them..." In America, we take pride in

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defending ourselves, in being independent. As a society, we forget our absolute dependence on God for true security and instead turn to guns – those in the hands of our armies, which spread destruction rather than peace, those in the hands of our police, which are used to spread terror instead of justice, and those in our homes, intended to be used in defending ourselves against intruders or perhaps those same armies but too often used against the innocent in rage, in despair, or by the unwary.

“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them...” I’m reminded of an old turn of phrase from Texas and the South that was part of a wonderful bit of humor in a play I once directed called “Greater Tuna.” In it, the rather nasty-spirited Vera Carp observes her friend Bertha Bumiller’s peculiar and anti-social son, Stanley, turns to Bertha, shakes her head sadly and says, “Bertha, that boy’s not right.” The proud aren’t right. Dennis Bratcher points out that the Hebrew word in Habakkuk, translated here as “right,” generally translates as to be straight, or to be healthy. Perhaps, he suggests, the verse might be translated, “Look at the Proud! They are deathly sick.” They are full of death, intending death towards others, destroying the true life in themselves. Robert Palmer, a poet of the early 20th century, reflected on the words of Habakkuk:

How long, O Lord, how long, before the flood
Of crimson-welling carnage shall abate?
From sodden plains in West and East, the blood
Of kindly men steams up in mists of hate,
Polluting Thy clean air; and nations great
In reputation of the arts that bind
The world with hopes of heaven, sink to the state
Of brute barbarians, whose ferocious mind
Gloats o'er the bloody havoc of their kind,
Not knowing love or mercy. Lord, how long
Shall Satan in high places lead the blind
To battle for the passions of the strong?
Oh, touch Thy children’s hearts, that they may know
Hate their most hateful, pride their deadliest foe.

Ultimately, of course, we who proclaim ourselves as Christians evaluate all the stories and lessons of the Scriptures through the person of Jesus. We pattern our lives after Jesus, who grew up in an occupied country yet still taught kindness to the occupying troops. We model our lives on Jesus, who taught turning the other cheek and loving enemies, blessing those who curse us, doing good to those who hate us, and praying for those who despise us. When we are tempted to strike back or to strike preemptively, we must remember that Jesus rebuked the disciple who attempted to defend him with a sword and healed the severed ear of the soldier who had come to take him to his death. Jesus said to his disciples, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” And even as he was being put to death, he prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

Just as Jesus expressed the greatest love by laying down his life for his brothers and sisters, so we are called to show love by living as sacrifices. We are now, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, the body of Christ, our own minds not conformed to the world, but transformed and renewed to match the mind of Christ. What it means to live as Christ's body with Christ's mind

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is first of all to love with a deep and genuine love, a love that comes from the center of who we are as the transformed body of Christ. Paul uses the word “agape” to name this love. This is the same love of which, in I Corinthians, he writes, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” In his book, The Strength to Love, Dr. Martin Luther King says, “The meaning of love is not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring. Love is much deeper than emotional bosh, meaningless talk or opinion. . . [A]gape [is] understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all [humankind]. An overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Agape is the love of God operating in the human heart. At this level we love [humankind] not because we like [everyone], nor because their ways appeal to us, not even because they possess some type of divine spark; we love every [person] because God loves [every person].” As we are called to love, so we are also called to resist what is not love. We are called to abhor that which is evil, to shrink from it in disgust, to detest the workings of evil and chaos and destruction. Wherever we find attitudes and actions that do not contribute to the working of compassionate agape love in our world, we must distance ourselves from those attitudes and actions.

“Abhor that which is evil, cling to that which is good.” In the next few verses, Paul gives us a solid idea of what he has in mind as the good to which we should cling. It has to do with casting off selfishness and putting the needs of others ahead of our own. We are called to be in redemptive community with each other. Being in redemptive community includes maintaining a positive attitude in all that we do. We are called not to give in to a sense of victimization and depression, which taxes both our own spiritual strength and the spiritual resources of the community, but to focus on hope, which replenishes both us personally and all those with whom we are in community. Paul's picture of the redemptive, agape community, the good to which we must cling, also includes the willingness of the community to reach beyond itself. Jonathan Miller wrote that part of the heart of Jesus' message is, “that we have deep and unconditional responsibilities for one another, and that there is nobody who is a negligible person.” Black lives do matter and we must be among those proclaiming this message in a society which, through their actions, often denies it. We might add, in rebalancing our culture's view of human worth, that Native Lives Matter, that the lives of the poor matter, that Women's Lives Matter. The Body of Christ must be the standard bearers for anyone who has experienced the disdain of our dominant culture.

The radical ethic to which Paul turns next in his description of the agape-filled life of the transformed body of Christ sounds as much like the teachings of Jesus as anything else we have from the apostle. It is unlikely that Paul heard the Sermon on the Mount but this passage certainly sounds as if he got a full report from an eyewitness during his early days as a Christian in Antioch. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse,” writes Paul, which sounds a great deal like “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” This is hard stuff! It is so easy to return opposition for opposition, violence for violence. We are competitive by nature, many of us. When someone gets in our face, we want to be able to walk away saying, “Well, I showed them!” There is no question but that we are supposed to resist evil; Paul is not calling on us to condone the actions of those who would persecute us. He is,

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however, calling on us to remember that even our opponents are persons loved by God, that they, too, belong in what Martin Luther King called “the Beloved Community.” If we are to help them feel the love of God and to see us as part of their community, we must take a different approach than cursing them.

Paul understands that we do not live in a perfect world. He knows that conflict along the way is inevitable. But if we practice the life of compassionate, agape community, we can keep conflict to a minimum. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” he says. And, when it's not possible, remember the spirit of blessing the enemy. Don't go for payback. As Mohandas Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind.” Again, Paul calls for the same radical interpersonal ethic that Jesus taught, although it may sound a little odd to us. When he writes “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all,” that sounds clear enough. But what about all this “Vengeance is mine” and “coals of fire” stuff. Is Paul having a flashback to the bad old days when he was the self-appointed Scourge of the Lord against that riff-raff who followed the blasphemous Galilean?

Listen carefully to what Paul has written: “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves but, rather, give place unto wrath.” Many translations say “the wrath of God,” or the equivalent, but God's name is not in the Greek manuscripts. I think Paul is talking about standing back and letting the anger of our opponents burn itself out. As scripture teaches us, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Doesn't that sound more like the action of the agape community that Paul has been urging us to build? And hasn't Paul all along been writing about the loving grace and forgiveness of God and the consequences that we bring on ourselves when we choose to remain in the power of Sin? In the context of Paul's carefully consistent theology, in his obvious reference back to the teachings of Jesus who brought good news of a loving Father, the “vengeance” of God must surely be understood to be the same as the gift of God; that we are free to choose and that many of us choose to immerse ourselves in destruction. There is no need to scuttle the soaring joy of Paul's message of redemption with the image of an angry and revenging God, swooping down on hapless sinners to cast them into everlasting fire.

Paul's message is consistent. Look what comes next: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink.” It is a message full of compassion. The word “feed” here is a special word in the Greek. It is *psomizo*, which means to feed abundantly, carefully and indulgently. It is often used of nurses who feed their young or ill charges with small morsels. It is a word full of tenderness. Paul is quoting here from the book of Proverbs, which gives us clues to the mystery of the burning coals. Much of the wisdom in the book of Proverbs is a Hebrew reworking of aphorisms that were common in the surrounding Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures. In Egypt, there was a repentance ritual that involved carrying a dish of coals on the head to prove the sincerity of the repentance. What Proverbs and Paul are suggesting is that kindness to an opponent will bring about their repentance and the redemption of the relationship. The Targum, the ancient Aramaic commentary on the Scriptures, which would have been well-known by the scholarly Paul and by the Jewish Christians in Rome, backs up this idea. It adds to this proverb, “...you will heap coals on his head and God will make him your friend.” Are those coals we heap on them only coals of repentance or are they something even better? The Song of Solomon, that beautiful love poem in the heart of the Old Testament, tells us that love is a burning flame and coals of fire. “...the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

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Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.” Truly God's love for all of us is unquenchable. The floods cannot drown it; the darkness cannot overcome it.

My sisters and my brothers, it may seem this morning as if the flames of violence are all around us. We are being reminded in the media, both professional and social, of the flames that burned our cities in 1968 and we are being warned to expect a repeat of that long, sad summer. But we must remember that the flames of love are stronger than the flames of hate. I am once again stirred by the words of Martin Luther King who, in an earlier time of hatred, said, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” In proclaiming ourselves as followers of Jesus, we have aligned ourselves with love. It is the love of Jesus, the love we are promised to live out, that will heal our nation and our world. By going out and loving our sisters and brothers, red, brown, yellow, black, white or blue, we further the cause of the God of freedom and justice, the God whose love is stronger than death. Let us go in the hope and strength of that love and the darkness will not overcome us.