

Cry, “Violence!”

When I first noticed that one of our Lenten Sundays fell on March 17th, I thought I might draw a lesson from the life of St. Patrick for my sermon this morning. That idea hadn't gotten very far when I received an e-mail from the Executive Minister of our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton, alerting me to a call from the American Baptist Home Missions Societies to all American Baptist Churches to participate in the Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath this weekend. Our Home Missions Societies let us know that “Organized by Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence and including participation by Washington National Cathedral and PICO National Network (the faith-based community organizing network), the event seeks not only to remember those who have lost their lives to gunfire but also to promote collaboration among faith communities to reduce gun violence.”

My immediate thought was that this event had an interesting resonance, for me, at least, with St. Patrick's Day. When I was growing up, there was no more immediate object lesson on gun violence, it seemed, than Ireland. Having spent over three years of my childhood in England and having visited the beautiful Emerald Isle, I was always alert to news reports on “the Troubles,” the sectarian violence that plagued Northern Ireland particularly from the time just after that idyllic visit to the land of some of my ancestors until the Good Friday accords of 1998. And, indeed, violence against fellows was a problem in Ireland as far back as the time of St. Patrick. In one of two extant writings that scholars are reasonably sure came from the pen of the saint, sometime in the late fifth century, Patrick wrote to a chieftain called Coroticus with his verdict of excommunication on the warlord for allowing his men to kidnap and forcibly enslave fellow Christians in Ireland.

But much as we might like to portray the problem of violence as long ago and far away, there is really no more profound example of the effects of violence and particularly of violence with guns than current day America. I spent a fair amount of time this week reviewing gun violence statistics and I won't bore you with a bunch of them but I do want to share a handful that really stood out to me. I mentioned the violence in Northern Ireland that seemed to me as a boy to be the most dreadful example of violence in the world. There was, of course, another horrifically violent conflict playing itself out – the Vietnam War, but that seemed different to me then, being an action of the noble United States against godless communism. I see things somewhat differently now. Nevertheless, the conflict in Vietnam was bloody, killing over 58,000 American soldiers in the 18 years between 1958 and 1975. But that's less than the number of civilians killed with guns in the U.S. in the average two-year period. “In 2010 alone,” according to the National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, “guns took the lives of 31,076 Americans in homicides, suicides and unintentional shootings. This is the equivalent of more than 85 deaths each day and more than three deaths each hour.” To give us a more current battlefield equivalency, as of this time last year, according to the Department of Defense, Operation Iraqi Freedom had resulted in 4,400 American troop deaths. Almost as many civilians are killed with guns in the U.S., however, every seven weeks. The victims of gun violence in the United States are disproportionately young. Of the more than 30 people shot and murdered each day, 1/2 of them are between the ages of 18 and 35 and fully 1/3 of them are under the age of 20. The United States is the sorry leader in this industry of death. “The U.S. homicide rate is 6.9 times higher than the rate in 22 other high-income populous nations combined, despite similar rates of non-lethal crime and violence rates. The firearm homicide rate in the U.S. was 19.5 times higher.” And, in a statistic that struck particularly close to home, “A study of Seattle, WA and

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Vancouver, Canada found similar overall rates of criminal activity and assault, but the relative risk of death from homicide was 63 percent higher in Seattle. All of the excess risk was explained by a 5-fold higher risk of being murdered with a handgun in Seattle.”

Now, while all these statistics are appalling, they are, perhaps, more suited for my impassioned speaking as a city councilmember rather than as a pastor — except of course for the fact that the LORD our God and God’s Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth, both stood and stand against violence of all kinds and in solidarity with and protection for the victims of violence. You have heard this morning the word that came through one of God’s prophets to Judah, Habakkuk. I want to spend a little time with his preaching against violence but it’s important to remember that God warns us against violence from the time of the first family throughout the scope of the Old Testament and into the New, where Jesus is a recognized champion of non-violence.

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?” After my recitation of just a few of the available statistics on violence committed with guns in America, that complaint might well be ours as well. Habakkuk didn’t know about firearms of any kind but he still saw how a government that spent more time, as we know from other prophetic works, 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 the 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 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, and those in our homes, intended to be used in defending ourselves against intruders or perhaps those same armies. In our pride, we refuse to acknowledge the danger of our “defensive weapons.” A few more quick statistics: “A gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used in a completed or attempted suicide (11x), criminal assault or homicide (7x), or unintentional shooting death or injury (4x) than to be used in a self-defense shooting.”

“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

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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.

Taking upon ourselves the twin roles of judge and executioner against those who threaten, offend or displease us is an old, old story. 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, he 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.”

Again and again in the Scriptures, God and the messengers of God remind us that we are not to be in league with death and violence. We struggle with how to interpret the simple commandment given through Moses: You shall not kill. What does this mean to us in terms of war authorized by our government, of abortion in its many different situations, of euthanasia for self or others, of capital punishment, of home defense? And how do we react in the face of God's other commandments about life and death? In an impassioned sermon on gun violence from last year, Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk cites the teaching of Leviticus 19:16 — “Al Ta-amod al dam reyecha, 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!”

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.”

How then, shall we live in the face of the example of Jesus and with the challenge of this Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath? First and foremost, we must master the sin, the violence within us, even as the Lord counseled Cain, for surely violence of one kind or another is always lurking at the door to our hearts whether it is the punishing blow or the cutting word or simply the

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violence of neglect and disdain. We must commit ourselves instead to the non-violent way of Jesus, remembering that we have modern exemplars of this lifestyle in Gandhi and King, men whose witness we cannot simply shrug off as that of the impossibly divine but that of faithful humans just as we are called to be.

Even as we engage with the struggle in our own hearts to master violence, working toward giving our Loving Creator the true rule of our lives, we must take up the cause for our neighbors, showing our love for them. We cannot, as Rabbi Nosanchuk reminded his congregation, stand idly by while our neighbor’s blood is spilled. We must raise our voices against the violence that is perpetrated by guns. We must raise our voices loudly and persistently. We must take seriously the word of the Lord to Habakkuk: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.” Our post-modern world has many ways to get the message out to those who are zooming past our lives. Few of us have the financial resources to mount a billboard campaign in favor of sensible gun control measures but all of us have the resources to donate in a small way to organizations that can and will do so. And all of us have the ability to get the message out in other ways – with our Facebook page or our e-mail contact list or by picking up the phone and calling our congressional delegates and local leaders.

All across the country, at all levels of government, measures to reduce gun violence are being considered. These are not the extreme measures that some would have us believe, but rather common sense proposals that don’t take guns away from legitimate collectors or sports enthusiasts or even those who honestly believe they must have guns for self-protection. If we want to stand against the violence that mars God’s beautiful creation in this nation, we can stand for the following:

1. Require background checks for all gun sales;
2. Strengthen the background check system for gun sales;
3. Pass a new, stronger ban on assault weapons;
4. Limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds;
5. Ban possession of armor-piercing ammunition;
6. End the Congressional freeze on gun violence research; and,
7. Ensure quality coverage of mental health treatment, particularly for young people.

These are the measures that some of our political leaders are willing to stand for and they are good steps in the right direction. What opposes them is not the will of the American people. Listen to one final set of numbers: Percentages in favor of registration of handguns - 79% of Americans, 69% of police chiefs, 61% of gun owners, 59% of NRA members; percentages in favor of background checks on private gun sales, including gun shows – 94% of police chiefs, 87% of Americans, 83% of gun owners, 69% of NRA gun owners. Fully 82% of all Americans support limiting the sales of military-style assault weapons and 77% of NRA members support a waiting period for purchase of a handgun. The time for sensible measures toward reducing gun violence has come.

We can and we must speak out. Friday was the Ides of March, the 15th of the month and famously the day that Julius Caesar was murdered by men bearing the weapons of choice in his day. William Shakespeare wrote his stirring dramatic version of the events and gave his character of Marc Antony the immortal line: “Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs of war.” But

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now is the time for us, conflating the words of Habakkuk and the Biblical imagery of restoration and baptism, to cry “Violence!” and let slip the doves of peace.

One final word from God in the vision of Habakkuk: even if the efforts now afoot should fail, even if the violence continues to rage and even to grow, we must not lose heart. “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” We are called to continue to trust in God and in God’s Anointed One, Jesus. As Dr. King said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Or as my wife is fond of saying, “It’ll all be OK in the end; if it isn’t OK, it isn’t the end.”

For the love of God, who created all of us and all of this world and called it good, and for the grace of Jesus, who lived and died and rose again to show us the way to live in oneness with God, and for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who challenges us and comforts us by walking alongside us – Thanks be to God!