

Violence Cannot Overcome Violence

A Sermon Preached at Hanover St. Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

Genesis 6:11-12

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

Revelation 18: 18b-21

Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! In one hour she has been laid waste. Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!' Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'so shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more.

Matthew 3: 1, 10-11a, 12

In those days John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand . . . Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I . . . His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Matthew 11: 11-12

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.

The other night I awoke at two something a.m. to the sound of gunfire. It was quite a volley, twenty reports or so, coming from north of the Brandywine and east of Market Street. I was reminded of the anxious nights when I used to lie on my cot under mosquito netting, listening to the brutal conversation of a distant fire fight,

praying the dispute would come no closer. Over there we used to say: "I can't wait for the freedom bird to take me back to the world." "Back to the world," we would say, as if the hell pit into which we had been dropped didn't belong to earth at all. Since then we have been disillusioned, for we toss in our own beds now, still listening to gunfire. For those who thought violence could be overcome by violence, violence has come home to roost.

The idea that violence can be overcome with violence is an old, old myth rooted in our religion. The Bible begins and ends with the myth of redemptive violence. "Now, the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and filled with violence," says our Genesis text. And how does God propose to eradicate violence? Through violence! "And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth.'" At the end of the Bible the great city of Babylon is the symbol of all that is evil and violent upon the earth. And how shall evil Babylon be redeemed? How shall it give way to the new Jerusalem, the ideal city of peace and good will? Why, through violence, of course! "Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'so shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more.'"

It is no surprise that Israelis and Palestinians, Irish Protestants and I.R.A. Catholics, are caught in whirlpools of violence. For these feuding spiritual cousins are convinced that the only way to overcome violence is to use greater violence against the violent, as indeed God does in their holy scriptures. Many a biblical prophet, like John the Baptist, preaches this myth of redemptive violence: "I baptize you with water for repentance," said John, "but he who is coming after me is mightier than I . . . His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

He was speaking, of course, about Jesus. John had a different sort of savior in mind than Jesus turned out to be. That's why, I think, Jesus said that though John was the greatest of prophets, nevertheless, even the least in the kingdom of heaven--(remember my remarks about the ironic kingdom from last week)--even the least in that kingdom are greater than John. Why? Because John, with his fire and brimstone preaching, perpetuated and reinforced the myth of redemptive violence, whereas Jesus had another vision of the path to redemption. That's why Jesus bemoaned that from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." The *basileia tou theou*, the

ironic "kingdom" of God about which Jesus preached so much, could not be attained through violence, even divine violence. Though Jesus admired the prophets' passion for social justice, which he heard loud and clear in his cousin, John's, preaching, I believe he did not share with John the conviction that the kingdom of God would come by divine, apocalyptic violence. I think Jesus was bemoaning even John's doing violence to the basileia tou theou, by continuing to preach the myth of redemptive violence.

Jesus had an alternate vision of redemption, a persuasive, not coercive redemption. And Jesus was not the first to express this vision. He borrowed it from the prophet, Isaiah, who wrote:

"Surely he has borne our griefs,
and carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
And with his stripes we are healed . . .
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
Yet he opened not his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
And like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
So he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
And they made his grave with the wicked . . .
Although he had done no violence."

Some readers may say: How remarkable, that the prophet Isaiah, many years before, predicted what would come true in the crucifixion of Jesus! But there is another way to understand this correspondence of prophesy to history, namely: Jesus found in Isaiah another path to salvation for a violent world, a path that meshed with his own vision of the ironic kingdom of God. Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant did not do violence to Jesus' vision of the basileia tou theou. Rather, it complimented that vision. And so, inspired by Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant, Jesus lived into it, deliberately. You will remember that Jesus had the opportunity to take up arms against his enemies at the last minute, just before he was arrested. Had he done so, he might very well have incited a riot, for the masses were expecting a military liberator. Many espoused that bellicose notion of messiah. But, Jesus did not subscribe to the myth of redemptive violence. He did not believe

that violence could be overcome with violence--even divine violence!
And so, he submitted. He became God's suffering servant, by whose stripes we might eventually learn to be healed from violence.

Jesus told many stories, comparing the kingdom of God to many things, such as the leaven in a loaf of bread, a mustard seed that grows and grows, and a pearl buried in a field. But, the banquet table is my favorite image of the kingdom. Our communion liturgy says that people will come from north and south, east and west, to sit at God's banquet table. Strangers, even adversaries, will sit down at this table, break bread together, and celebrate the love of the host for each and every one, which makes them brothers and sisters of the same family. As you come to this table today, ask God to help you lay aside any notion that you can redeem anyone by coercion, let alone violence. Ask God to help you lay aside the notion that God is on your side alone, and that God will solve all your problems by destroying your enemies. This is a biblical notion, incidentally, one very prevalent in the psalms; but it is not the way of Jesus. Come to this table, then, not because you are powerful and able to accomplish what you envision, but because you are meek, and poor in spirit. Come to this table powerless to impose your will, and God will bless you richly. Blessed are you peacemakers, for you shall be called children of God.