

What the Gospels Say about Violence

Matthew 2:13-18

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On Friday morning at 9:30, at the request of the Governor, we silenced the Christmas carols that normally play from our carillon at that hour and instead rang one chime 26 times, one for each victim of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. We have not silenced the carols this morning, and we still sing them with joy and anticipation. But we also look back at the tragedy of ten days ago, one which some have said has shaken this country as nothing has since 9/11.

There is no point in asking why this tragedy took place, as if we could make some sense of it. Those who insist on blaming the shooting on the Supreme Court or on the fact that there were not enough men in the school or even the NRA are using a tragedy to promote their own agenda. We cannot assign blame, except to the shooter himself—and even in that case we may determine that it was a brain disease that was most at fault. And it makes no sense to blame God, as if we really wanted God to take away our human freedom so that we could not choose to hurt one another.

And yet there is this juxtaposition of Christmas and tragedy, the story of the birth of one precious baby and the slaughter of twenty others, a season of joy and a season of sadness. That juxtaposition raises the question of what the story of Jesus has to say about this sad world of ours. Can we make a connection between Bethlehem and Sandy Hook?

With all the talk of the violence in our culture, I decided to go back through the gospels and look at what they say about violence. It doesn't take long, really, to skim through all four books looking for acts of violence or teaching about violence. I'll tell you what I found out.

First, there isn't a whole lot of violence in there, in spite of the fact that the climax of the story in each gospel is an act of violence against Jesus. You never once see Jesus dealing with a person who was a victim of violence. He deals with countless victims of disease and mental illness and ethnic or religious prejudice, but he never helps someone who has been robbed or stabbed or raped. In that regard, Jesus is completely different from the kind of superheroes we created in America in the 20th century who are crime-fighters; we imagined that kind of hero because we thought violent crime was the worst problem we faced, at least in our cities. And in fact, if we allow ourselves to imagine Jesus being dropped down into Chicago rather than Jerusalem it's hard not to think that mothers would come to him asking for help for their children who have been shot in drive-bys.

The only reference in all four gospels to the kind of crime we usually think of when we speak of the problem of violence comes in a sermon illustration; it's a made-up story, not an event in Jesus' life. Jesus tells the story of the man who was traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who was attacked and beaten by robbers. The point of that story is that loving our neighbors means helping the victims of crime—even if they are from a very different neighborhood. But why there are robbers and why they are violent is not addressed.

In all the gospels I found only two acts by individuals that could be called acts of violence. The first comes when Jesus goes into the temple to clean out those who are buying and selling there in the court of the Gentiles. Jesus turns over tables and benches. It seems to be a symbolic act of protest, not a way to hurt people. No one reports that Jesus hurt a human being, although John says that he made himself a whip to drive sheep and cattle out of the temple. Some people read that story and think that Jesus had a fit of rage—so they are entitled to have a fit, too. I recall one church business meeting where a big bully of a guy got up and began his remarks by saying that Jesus got angry, so he could get angry

too. In other words, if Jesus beat up those guys in the temple, he could beat up the preacher. Of course I don't think that Jesus was out of control in the temple. He knew exactly what he was doing in a nonviolent protest against corruption in the temple, in what amounted to an economic blockade of the temple for one day so that no one could go in or out. So in my accounting, turning over the tables doesn't quite count as violence.

What that leaves as the sole act of individual violence occurs when Jesus is arrested. One of his disciples—John's gospel identifies him as Peter—pulls out a sword and cuts off the right ear of a servant of the high priest. Jesus fusses at him. In Matthew 26:52 he says, "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Then, you will remember, Jesus puts the ear back on the poor servant's head and heals him. If this scene were playing out today, of course Peter would be packing heat in the garden. When the temple soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter would pull out his 9 mm. Jesus would say to him, "Put your gun back in its place; all who draw the gun will die by the gun." That's probably not in the NRA translation.

So we have two acts of individual violence: one is a protest that could arguably be called nonviolent, and the other is an act which is immediately condemned and made right by healing.

But here's the main thing I noticed by going through the gospels: almost all of the violence in the gospels is state violence. The violence that concerns the gospel writers is not the random individual acts of criminality that concern us. What they report is institutional violence, violence done by kings and temple authorities and Roman soldiers, all perfectly legal, but still evil.

The first such report comes right after the "Christmas" section of the first gospel in the passage we read this morning. After the Magi leave the country, King Herod—the Jewish puppet supported by the Roman Empire—is frustrated that he has not found the newborn Messiah, because a newborn king is clearly a threat to his power. So Herod orders the murder of all baby boys under age two in the vicinity of Bethlehem. For Matthew, this is a replay of the Moses story. You may remember the story of baby Moses in the bulrushes, hidden in a basket in the water because Pharaoh ordered the murder of all the baby boys in Egypt. Matthew plays with the theme of Jesus as the new Moses throughout the gospel—Jesus on a mountain proclaiming a new kind of law, Jesus giving five sermons in the book like the five books of Moses. But just because the slaughter of the innocents fits the Moses theme doesn't mean it didn't happen. And it certainly doesn't mean that Matthew doesn't want us to see the similarity between the Roman-sponsored government and the oppressive reign of the Pharaohs. The first violent actor in the gospel—and on a scale of genocide—is the government. It is not Matthew's purpose to create trust of government or submission to it.

The next act of violence we learn of in the gospels is the beheading of John the Baptist. John is a true prophet, a man of God. God does not protect him from violence any more than he protects Jesus, in the end. The story is sleazy and a little over-the-top. The dissolute Herod Antipas—the son of the first King Herod—has John arrested because he dared to say publicly that Herod's marriage was incestuous. He had married his niece, his half-brother's daughter. And now that woman, named Herodias, has her daughter Salome dancing a very sexual dance in front of the men of the court. The king is so aroused by this that he promises Salome whatever in the world she wants. She could have asked for a pony or a new chariot, but her mother whispers in her ear that she'd like the head of that prophet who called me a slut. So what Salome wants, Salome gets. Herod already has John the Baptist in a prison cell, so he sends his soldiers to cut off his head, executing him for treason, and they bring the head of the prophet to the young dancer on a platter. Once again we are talking about something done legally by a government with an interest in silencing God's spokesman.

There is one brief reference in Luke 13:1 to an incident in which Pilate killed some Galileans—presumably they were zealots or insurgents of some sort—and mixed their blood in the temple with the

blood of their sacrifices. Jesus' point is that those victims of violence were no worse sinners than anyone else. Their sin had nothing to do with it.

The rest of the violence in the gospels has to do with the passion, as we call it, the suffering of Jesus culminating in the crucifixion. In each of the gospels, this is the largest section, at least a third of the book. Everything else in the story was leading up to this story, the story of the cross. And when we get to that part of the story, all we see is state violence. I have to say that as you read the gospels it is not quite as explicit and grisly as Mel Gibson's movie version of the passion; it's told rather matter-of-factly without elaboration. The soldiers—we might think of them more as police officers—seem to have permission to use violence against Jesus. They strike him with their fists; they slap him; they hit him on the head with a staff; and they flog him with whips. Ultimately, of course, they nail his hands and feet to the beams of a wooden cross, and when they want to make sure he is dead, they thrust a spear into his side. All this is accomplished not by men out of control but by men following orders. All of this is, in their view, completely legal, and in the best interests of national security. Better for one man to die than to put the nation at risk.

So where does this leave us? You know, I can't believe that there were no murders in Galilee or Judea during the time Jesus lived. But those crimes of violence did not seem to be relevant to the gospel writers. What did seem relevant were the acts of violence perpetrated by the state. They knew that Jesus died due to state violence, not the acts of a madman. They knew that the church was under the threat of violence from legally established authorities, not random acts of revenge by other religious groups.

So I can't say for sure what Jesus would say this week about the killings in Connecticut, but it seems likely that the gospel writers would find it odd that our hearts are broken by the murder of 20 children in our own country but not distressed at all by the killing of children in other countries that are legally authorized by the government. When I visited Sonny Kern in the hospital I talked with his nurse, a man whose son-in-law had just returned from Afghanistan and was so traumatized he did not want to leave his bedroom. He'd spent two tours in Iraq before that. He was on a bomb squad, which would make anybody nervous, but what really got to him was the fact that they were under orders to shoot any Afghan girl that approached them, because they might be suicide bombers. The Afghans would not sacrifice a boy for such a purpose, but girls are expendable. Others have pointed out this week the difference between our reaction to Sandy Creek and our reaction to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen that have killed, reportedly, 178 women and children. Sometimes it is by accident, as when we struck a wedding by mistake. Sometimes they are just collateral damage as we go after suspects—civilians suspected of working with terrorists. Young men sitting somewhere in the heartland of America playing what seems like a very elaborate video game are able to take out whole families in an instant. But because it is state violence, because it is all legal, we barely blink an eye.

I have cried, like you, at seeing the photos of the children killed at Sandy Creek Elementary. I can hardly bear to see the parents or the teachers who are coping with the loss. I do not want to minimize the depth of that tragedy. But I do not want to minimize either that which the media and the government have minimized, the death of other people's babies in other nations. There are no photos of those children on our screens. There are no teddy bears for them.

I do not have to explain to you what Jesus himself says about violence in the gospels. "Do not kill" is not good enough; his standard is "Do not hate." "Love your country" is not good enough; the new standard is "Love your enemies." Jesus told us not to return evil for evil. He told us that retaliation was the way of the past, not the way of the kingdom. He said that if someone smacks you on one cheek you offer your enemy the other. You forgive and you forgive. Besides that, Jesus said to put away our weapons. If we live by our weapons we will die by our weapons.

So it seems to me that Jesus is on the side of those who want to reduce violence. We are right to act on three fronts: reducing access to military-style weapons, improving access to mental health care especially for young men, and changing the culture of violence shaped by video games and action movies. I don't see why Christians of all parties can't agree to support those things. But doing those things doesn't let us off the hook for changing the broader culture of violence which is shaped by the military-industrial complex that allows a nation full of Jesus-followers to ship arms all over the world and delete civilians as if they were targets on a screen.

It has to start in our hearts. We have to love all the babies of the world as Jesus does. We have to stop demanding guns for ourselves, asserting our rights when that policy endangers others. We have to stop stigmatizing mental illness so that people are afraid to name it and seek treatment. But most of all we have to take Jesus into our hearts so that his love can take control and his Spirit fill us with patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. Only his love—the love that came at Christmas and showed itself on the cross—can empower us to love our enemies as we love ourselves. And that is what Jesus asks of us, at Christmas and every day.