

“Being Right Sometimes is of Little Consolation”

22 October 2023

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Scripture: Luke 22:47-54

Luke 22:47 Suddenly while he was still speaking, a crowd appeared and the one called Judas, also one of the original twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to greet him with a kiss. But Jesus said to him, "Judas, are you turning me in with a kiss?"

And when those around him figured out what was going on, they asked, "Should we use our swords now?" But before he could answer, one of his disciples struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.

But Jesus said, "Stop! No more violence!" He then touched the slave and healed his ear.

Then Jesus spoke directly to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with your swords and clubs as if I were some kind of rebel? I've been with you in plain sight day after day in the temple, but you didn't lay a hand on me then. But this is your hour when the power of darkness reigns!"

Then they arrested him and led him away...

Sermon

I like being right, I really do! Cathy will tell you. I mean, more times than not, she'll finally walk away, giving up the cause, just to keep the peace in the house - which by the way, can infuriate me even more! But I also admit to you this morning that sometimes being right can also be of little consolation.

Take for instance my conviction that war is wrong. The tally, as of this morning, in the latest violence between Israel and Palestinians is as follows: In Gaza at least 4,651 have been killed, including 1,756 children and more than 14,245 injured. While at least 1,405 in Israel have been killed and at least 5,132 injured. The score as we see, is already horrendous and only getting worse, especially for those Palestinians living in Gaza. I have to wonder if either side is winning!

And as the images flood our screens we see far too much destruction, human suffering and senseless death on both sides. Once again, I can pull out my little sign, as I have too many times before and declare that "War Is Not the Answer!" I want to believe that in the end love will win, but damn it, how much more hatred must we endure until it does?

I must admit to you it's been a really hard couple of weeks for me. Typically, the fall is a time when I find myself already in a bit more of a somber state. I tend to become more reflective, become a bit more melancholy - sadness and even a little depression naturally come along side. They are helpful reminders, I believe, that all is not rosy in our world. And they help me to be in tune a bit more with the sadness in others.

But then Hamas shocked the world with unimaginable scenes of carnage. Stuff that can result when you place 2.5 million folks in the world's largest outdoor prison, with little food, no jobs and little hope.

Now as some of you know, I used to be involved with an organization named CPT (or formerly Christian Peacemaker Teams). This is an organization started by mostly folks in North America that belong to historic Peace Churches (Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers) that provide folks trained in nonviolent strategies to go into places of conflict to live out our faith-based conviction that peaceful solutions are more desirable than war.

From 2001 to 2014, I made four trips to the West Bank of Palestine, helping folks see first-hand the causes of violence and to experience first-hand those non-violent efforts being taken to create a more just and truly peaceful solution.

On my first trip I was part of a delegation that arrived within days following Israel's invasion of the West Bank. This was Israel's response after a series of very deadly suicide bombings coordinated by Palestinian militants within Israel. On that trip I saw first-hand what constitutes an Israeli "ground operation" and exactly what the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are capable of. Wanton destruction of Palestinian lives and communities and, yes, many violations of the rules of war. Those are the images that come to me as I brace myself for Israel's imminent "ground incursion" into Gaza.

Now of course, the shelling and bombing of civilians has already destroyed too many and so much in Gaza. Targeting civilians is a war crime, but so too is denying food, water, medicines, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Now we brace for further death and destruction that seemingly lie ahead for those unlucky to have been born in Gaza. Maybe like me, you want scream along with Edwin Starr who once blared from our radios in 70's, "War! What is it good for? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!"

And yet here we go again, rushing, as if we cannot help ourselves, headlong over the cliff with more horrific spasms of violence! This current "War against Hamas" which has always included the massive shelling and bombing of Gaza is the fifth war in 18 years!

Prior attacks were euphemistically called, "mowing the grass" by the Israeli military. Or a similarly onerous, but necessary task, so that the grass, or in this case, militant groups such as Hamas, won't get too overgrown or out of control.

Asking the question, "why" those militant groups never seem to stop growing, never seems to enter the calculation. But this time it does seem a bit different as the violent rhetoric coming from many Israeli leaders, is the desire to not only literally dig up the entire place, but to then coat it with Roundup! Meanwhile the leaders of my country only want to send more weapons to Israel - pouring more gas on an already raging fire!

I must admit that I come to you with little hope and a profound feeling of helplessness this morning. So let me share some thoughts I managed to gather from a variety of sources that I've read in the past two weeks.

First, we must renounce violence — all violence, from all perpetrators, for any cause, without exception. We must also remind ourselves that violence just isn't a solution as it was so eloquently expressed by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King:

“The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it... Through violence, you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, 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.”

Murdering entire families, in their homes in southern Israel is an immoral act of terrorism! But so to is the slow death of children in Gaza when food, clean water, and vital medicines are not allowed into Gaza. In the past two weeks, more bombs have been dropped on Gaza than in all four previous bombings of Gaza combined, and in that same two weeks more children have been killed in Gaza than in those previous wars with Hamas combined. That too is immoral and it is terrorism.

Israel claims that it must go to extreme measures in order to “eliminate” Hamas so that they can then live in peace. But no amount of military ferocity will permanently crush the ideology that now animates Hamas to engage in terrorism. Continuing to go down this hopeless path of war and militarism must stop before it leads to more ruin and possible genocide.

Second, God's love goes beyond nationalistic borders. A seemingly innocuous statement and an idea that likely makes sense to most of us! But considering the times in which we live, it is an idea that is downright profoundly prophetic! Wesley Granberg-Michaelson of Sojourners Magazine says:

“The biblical prophets called for radical inclusion of the outsider, challenging the narrow nationalistic righteousness bred by an exclusive understanding of whom God favored. God's covenant — frequently broken by the unfaithfulness of God's people — was prophetically and continually redefined to reach even wider than what was normally imagined. God's blessing on the people of Israel was linked to its treatment of the foreigner, the stranger, and the outsider; offering a prophetic word today holds forth that calling for any people, toward all people.”

And finally, I will also borrow from Granberg-Michaelson who says we must come to see our enemies as God's children as well. He says:

"a Christian witness to unspeakable violence recovers the most radical, counter-cultural truth of all, which always is repressed in such onslaughts: the presence of the image of God, resting at the heart of every person, beneath all else that would cover or blaspheme it. Always, at the heart of the "other," the image of God is there. In the end, our addiction to violence violates God, whose love remains linked to all that God has created. The ironic tragedy is that many of the people engaged in either side of this horrific conflict — people who pledge their fidelity to the God they worship as holy — deny any semblance of God's presence in the other, sanctioning their acts of devastation."

Seldom will we have all the right answers to diffuse violence and end wars in our world, but we should know, I think by now, what clearly does not and has not worked. Not having all the solutions should never keep us from acknowledging the first and primary solution which is, as Jesus shouted to those who attempted to protect him with violence, "STOP! NO MORE VIOLENCE!" The destructive and descending spiral of violence can only be stopped by stopping.

The spiral is only broken when one (or both sides) find the courage and decide to do just that - stop! A pause or cease fire then will allow our true humanity to catch up and possibly resolve some of our fears and our reactive desires for revenge and punishment. It can also give us pause and time to ask the question and then to also realize the truth, "War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing!"

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