

Hating Mothers as the Way to Peace

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I've been asked to write on preaching on the "Peaceable Kingdom." Rather than write about preaching on the "Peaceable Kingdom," I would prefer to provide an example of how I tried to preach the "Peaceable Kingdom." I was asked to preach at the United Methodist Church in Pittsboro, North Carolina, the Sunday they were to read the Methodist bishops' pastoral on nuclear war. I simply used the lectionary text appointed for that Sunday and the resulting sermon developed. I hope it manifests my conviction that "peace" is not a subject abstracted from the Gospel but, rather, is intrinsic to what we believe the salvation wrought in and by Jesus is about.

Texts: Ezekiel 33:1-11, Philemon 1:1-20, Luke 14:25-33

Most of us believe we are nonviolent. We believe that we would prefer to be peaceable rather than violent in most circumstances of our lives. Violence is something we believe exists "out there" in criminal behavior or in relations between states. We simply do not believe it is in our souls. Rather, violence is in structures of our existence insofar as they are determined by past and ongoing injustice.

Moreover, there is some basis for this belief. Few of us have ever threatened anyone with physical violence. We may entertain heroic fantasies of responding to or employing violence in a good cause. But most of us discover that if we are actually confronted with violence and need to respond in kind, we become physically ill. We simply are not natural killers. We sincerely prefer to live in order rather than in the disorder that violence always seems to breed.

It is very hard indeed to get us to kill. This is true even in war, as it was discovered in World War I that 40% of the soldiers in combat never fired their weapons. That is the reason the military created the platoon system, as there friendships are created that force us finally to use violence in the protection of one another. As Jay Glenn Gray notes in his wonderful book *The Warriors*, "Numberless soldiers have died more or less willingly, not for country or religious faith or for any other abstract good, but because they realized that by fleeing their post and rescuing themselves they would expose their companions to greater danger. Such loyalty is the essence of fighting morale." So even in war we discover that we are not violent in ourselves, but only because we so care about those we have learned to love by being exposed to a common danger.

In short, we kill to protect others. In that sense our psychology seems to fit Augustine's defense of the use of violence through war. Augustine argued it is incompatible for a Christian to use violence for personal protection. Thus, his defense of the just war was never on grounds that it was analogous to self-

defense. Rather, Augustine argued that Christians can only use violence to protect the innocent, and by innocent he only meant those who did not deserve the attack they were receiving. So the Christian justification of violence does not derive from the assumption that we at times cannot avoid defending ourselves; rather, violence is necessary if we are charitably to protect the innocent.

All of which reminds us that our violence lies not in ourselves but in our loves. We think it crucial to protect those we love. Indeed, I suspect most of us go to war to protect our loves. Our families, our neighborhoods are what we care about when we go to war—nations are but symbols of those cares.

Moreover, there seems to be something deeply right about this. It is natural to defend those we love, and we would have little use for those who did not feel they should so defend those they love. Cowardice, in fact, is to place our interest in survival over those we love. It is only on this basis that we can understand why war is such an important moral institution, as without it we would lack the means of sacrifice so crucial for us to know how important our loves are to us.

I suspect this is the reason the gospel text above is so jarring: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." On hearing this hard word, we think that Jesus must surely be speaking figuratively—after all, if Christianity is about anything today, we think it must surely be about supporting the family. What Jesus must mean, therefore, is that we must not love our families too much. He is simply recommending that we need to get our priorities right. We should remember to not make our families God. But once we remember that, it is surely right to love our families even to the taking of the life of others, if necessary, to defend them.

Yet that is not what the text says. It does not say that we've merely got our priorities wrong. Rather, it says that now that we are in the presence of Jesus Christ, all our relations have been transvalued. In the death and resurrection of this man, a great reversal has taken place, causing all our natural loves to be transformed.

This is the beginning of a new age—an age that we do not become part of unless we hate mother, hate father, hate wife and children. This is not just a matter of getting our priorities right. No, it means that now everything has been returned to its original purpose. The new age is here in the person of Jesus Christ. We are no longer under the powers of the old age—powers that feed on our fears and our loves, so that we are led to kill other people's children in the name of protecting our children. Hate mother, hate father, hate wife and children only makes sense if we now live in a new time where everything is made new. The wolf will now lie down with the lamb, and we can love our children without threatening the children of others.

Indeed, Jesus argues in a quite common sense way that when you are going to build a tower, you would be pretty silly to begin without knowing if you had the resources to complete it. So, should you only get the foundation done, you will be mocked, for your neighbors will say, "What a silly person to have begun a project without knowing whether the resources were available to

complete it.” Raised the son of a bricklayer, I think I can understand just how silly we would be to start such a project.

Or again, Jesus suggests that those who encounter another in war had better make sure they have the soldiers to win. To enter war, the most serious of business, facing certain defeat would surely be silly. If you confront unfavorable odds, you certainly ought to sue for peace before you begin the battle. Otherwise, many people will sacrifice their lives for no good reason.

The purpose of these examples is not to give recommendations about how to be a better builder and/or general. The point is that if Jesus is the Messiah, it is surely absurd to think we can follow Jesus while clinging to the attachments of the old age. Rather, to be his disciple means that all our past, all our loves—the loves of our mothers, our fathers, our wives and children—are now put in a new context. We have become part of a new kingdom that makes it possible for our loves to be the basis of peace rather than the source of our violence. For in this new age we love, knowing our security is in God, who has redeemed time through the establishment of his kingdom in Jesus. We no longer need desperately try to ensure the survival of those we love, for we can now love them with the security and the conviction that God’s kingdom is surely here. In short, Jesus brought the end time so that we may have the time to love without that love becoming the source of our violence.

Putting this as dramatically as I can, Jesus’ claim about the end time is equivalent to a nuclear war. Imagine yourself surviving a nuclear war. Imagine yourself being one of the survivors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki. We can hardly imagine what that would feel like, but we know that surely everything—even our loves—would be forever changed. Common testimony of those at Hiroshima is that after the bomb they were numb, feeling nothing. Moreover, even as their feelings returned, their lives were forever scarred by that event. Everything they did afterward was in reference to their being survivors. The bomb had scarred their history, transfiguring past and future. Each individual had to learn to love as a survivor—to be a brother or a sister as a survivor, to be a mother or husband as a survivor. In short, they had to learn to cherish one another under the dreadful knowledge of what happened then and what perhaps awaited in the future.

But as Christians we believe that what happened in Jesus Christ was more dramatic than what happened at Hiroshima or even than what would happen if there were a nuclear exchange between America and the Soviet Union. For what happened in Jesus Christ is that God sent his son to reclaim his creation, and we killed him. It is often said today that there is nothing we could do that is worse than destroying the human species through a nuclear war. That is surely wrong. We have already done the worst thing we could do. We killed him who would work our redemption. That is the worst thing that humankind could possibly do.

But the good news is that the God we crucified refused to let our “no” be the final word. God refused to hold this horrible sin against us. Raising Jesus from the grave, God rejects our rejection. Instead, God offers us the opportunity to become part of a new kingdom—of a new time—so that the world might know its true sovereign. It is a time that creates the space for us to learn

to love one another, so that now our loves will not become the excuse to kill in the name of those loves. For now we have learned that the very heart of love is a nonviolence, as God has come not to coerce us into loving. Rather, because God has made it possible for us to freely respond to this love, we become new creatures.

It is no wonder, therefore, that we believe as Christians what has happened in Jesus Christ is more significant than even a nuclear war—that we believe what has happened in Jesus Christ has changed all our relations. But this “bomb” that is our redemption does not leave us numb as the bomb at Hiroshima left the survivors there. On the contrary, this bomb empowers us to witness to the world what good news it is that God has rejected our rejection. God uses our sin to offer us a new life, free from the fear that fuels our violence. For now we know that God has removed the violence that once lay in our loves, as we have been taught to love one another, not in general but in Christ. Only that love can be the love of peace, for we can love not fearing its loss. Rather, we can be confident that now our loves rightly build Christ’s kingdom, which is the only alternative to the world’s kingdom of war.

This is the gospel. This is what makes it possible for us to be at peace—to be a peaceable people—in a world at war. For we Christians do not believe that we should be peaceable because our peace is a political strategy for freeing the world from war. Rather, we Christians know we must be peaceable, not because our peaceableness will free the world from war, but because our peace is the only way that we can live in a world at war.

This kind of living, of course, is what we do here as we worship God. Through our worship we proclaim to the world we are a people in service to God, so that we can take the time—even in a world at war—to share here in God’s peace, wishing one another a share in that same peace. We know the world in its feverish attempt to make peace a reality would have us kill in the name of such peace. Yet we know there cannot be a peace we share with one another before coming to share God’s life in eucharist.

That is what we do here as we celebrate God’s peace. Here we become brothers and sisters caring for one another in Christ. We care for one another not in family bloodlines but in Christ. The blood of the cross has forever qualified the blood of the family, making it impossible for us to spill the blood of others in the name of our families. This new eschatological family we call the church now has our fundamental loyalty that makes possible the peace, even among families.

For example, much today is said about domestic violence. The causes of this horrible phenomenon are no doubt many and complex. But surely one of the reasons we seem so incapable of providing an alternative for such violence is that we have no way of providing a paradigm of love that is genuinely peaceable apart from the family. If we are to love one another well in the family—as husbands and wives, as brothers and sisters, as parents and children—we need a sense of a love that is at once nonviolent as it is truthful. Such love cannot be real without our family’s loves being fundamentally qualified by the love that we learned in the church.

I am aware that this is an extraordinary and perhaps even frightening

thing to say, but then God is a frightening presence. Indeed, from this perspective I suspect some of us begin to have just a little sympathy with those who put Jesus to death. How dare Jesus tell me to hate my father, my mother, and especially my children! Yet that is exactly what he said we must do if we are to be part of God's kingdom of peace and love. For any love that does not love the other relative to the God who has loved us is now accursed. Any love that does not love in the manner that God loves us in Jesus of Nazareth will only be as such a cause of our violence, as it provides the needed rationale to unleash the vengeance of the wrongs others do to those we love.

This is indeed a hard saying, but the message is still harder. As we learn from the passage in Ezekiel, God's watchman can be tempted not to sound the warning. Moreover, if we fail to warn, then the very iniquity of those we are called to warn is ours. These are frightening words indeed for those of us who would bear the name Christian. For we believe Christ has made us, his church, the watchman for the world. Our task is to sound the horn that the world might be warned that its ways lead only to its own destruction.

Yet the extent of violence in the world, the *mad* situation in which we find ourselves in regard to nuclear weapons, is but a sign of the church's failure to be God's watchman—to be God's hornblower. The church's task is not to warn the world that it stands on the brink of destroying itself through nuclear war. The world knows that. You can read about that in the *New York Times*. Rather, the church's task is to tell the world that the reason it is so violent is because of its unbelief and that its loves are thereby perverted. For the world does not believe that Jesus has in fact risen, making present a new age and thus transforming our lives. The world does not believe in a God that refuses to let our rejection of Jesus determine our relations to God and to one another. We must say to the world, as watchmen, that we see the sword and that all that is the world must turn from unbelief. We must learn to love our lives as gifts and not as possessions. We must learn to love those who are so important to us as gifts from God and not as our possessions. Only then will the world have an alternative to the world's violence.

It is good news indeed, as we hear in Ezekiel, that God takes no pleasure in our death but, instead, calls us to life as his church, in order that the world might know there is an alternative to our violence. Church statements against nuclear war will do little to make the bomb go away. But that is not the church's task. Our task is to watch and blow the warnings, that we and the world might know God has redeemed us in Jesus Christ in a manner that nothing we do—even the destruction of the world—can remove. Let us praise God for that—even for being led time and time again to God's table of sacrifice where our loves are transformed, so that rather than being the source of violence our loves become the exemplification of God's peace. Amen.

. . . That is how I preached on the "Peaceable Kingdom."