

## **Peace not Violence**

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“The nation needs to do some “soul-searching” on how to reduce violence”, says President Obama. In recent days our televisions broadcast one after another sad violent attack or the “hindsight” of what “could have, should have” been done to prevent them. They encompass our nation, Colorado, Arizona, Virginia, and now a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. Sadly all of these attacks have something in common, not just the lone intent of an individual(s) to take other lives. In most cases it was precipitated by some form of mental illness, or societal aberration. The man who shot Gabby Giffords in Arizona admitted he had not taken his medications to control his schizophrenia for nearly a year. In Colorado a smart student suddenly loses his grip on school and possibly reality. In Virginia, a man with a history of severe anxiety kills nearly 40. Here in Wisconsin a man with ties to white supremacy hate groups continues the theme. Addressing the violence in society is only part of the solution. Finding ways to recognize, identify and treat these individuals before they act out a terrible nightmare is key. I have heard people saying, “ Why do criminals, terrorists and other mentally ill people have access to guns?” Whether it’s fanatics with box cutters, or bombs made of fertilizer, the result is the same. Many of these men began to drift to the margins of society where they fell through the gaps; gaps of medical care, mental health care, family and community support. As they drifted away from what was good and wholesome and worthy they became fueled by the power to control whether another individual lived or died. Anger, frustration, isolation are all part of the equation. So how do we identify and provide the mental health care and support needed to turn the culture of violence into a culture of peace.

Jesus sees beyond our culture of violence as the gospel says: “Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had “compassion” for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v.34). The four gospels show us that Jesus is a man of great compassion. It is mentioned at least eight times there. It tells us about Jesus’ attitude toward human beings. Not just poor, helpless human beings. He ministered to the mentally sick, friendless, despondent, criminals and those living on the margins of society. It is the entire witness of Jesus’ life. His healing ministry is prominent in the gospels. He even praised the faith of the woman who reached out for healing by brazenly touching the hem of his robe. For Christians, Jesus is revelatory of God and indeed God’s unique representative in history. Compassion is the essence of the One who created us and for whom all life is lived.

This description of Jesus as a man of compassion is purposely promoted in the gospels. It is the very essence of the prophetic traditions of ancient Israel which Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel calls “divine pathos”: “to the Prophet ... God does not reveal Himself in abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate

relationship to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is moved and affected by what happens in the world. ... God is concerned about the world and shares its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of man." [1] Followers of Jesus Christ cannot be passive spectators or participants in violence. He offers us an alternative and expects action. "You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 4: 43-44). This might sound naïve and weak to the powerful, just as the message of the cross seemed ineffective to perpetrators of violence in Jesus' time. But true disciples understand the ultimate intent is to redeem humanity from the bondage of violence, not to place one group in power over another. The church's mission is to proclaim the gospel of release and redemption even in the face of terror, and death. The church is empowered by Jesus Christ to proclaim his message of healing and reconciliation. If we don't, who will? "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus sends his Church on a two-fold mandate to love God and to love our neighbor. We can do both by recognizing and repeating these truths among people of all faiths, even the faithless.

Christians and people of the living faith beliefs and devotion to God are similar in many respects. We should seek and celebrate our commonalities and tolerate our differences. In our communities we should seek opportunities for dialogue; to learn and appreciate each other's faith traditions. Hans Kung, a Catholic theologian has said, "There can be no peace among nations without peace among the religions and religious peace can be established only through religious dialogue."

Our religious communities of faith emphasize worship and prayer as essential elements in faithfulness to God. This is exactly what the Sikh community was doing in their house of prayer when attacked by a gunman filled with hate. Followers of Christ should unceasingly pray for harmony and tolerance among our faith communities. We invite people of all faiths to pray with us for peace and goodwill on earth towards each other.

Our churches and homes should be embassies of hospitality. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). Henry Nouwen has said, "Hospitality is our vocation: to convert *hostis* into *hospes*, the enemy into guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced."

People of all faith communities need each other. In a world where technology draws us ever closer, intertwining lives and livelihood, it is imperative that we co-exist peacefully in our global village. Praying and working for peace and reconciliation must become daily activities for each and every follower of Christ.

Jesus of the Gospels is a man of compassion, peace to reconcile and to heal the broken timber of our humanity caused by hatred and walls of division. For Christians our missional call is to live our lives with the same compassion as Jesus. It is reaching out to those on the margins of society, letting them know they are not lost sheep, but found. The call of the disciples of Jesus is not to forecast doom and gloom but to call our world to a better way of living as we have come to know that God extracted out of the death of Jesus Christ a great victory, the victory of life over death, that God showed in the victory of Jesus that goodness is stronger than evil, that love is stronger than darkness, that life is stronger than death, that love is stronger than hate.[2]

Our work is in the world, not cloistered in church buildings set apart from the challenges of daily life. Jesus and his disciples encountered people in need as part of their movement to heal, to feed, and to be the agents of shalom to transform our society, calling them to repent from their disastrous evil ways. Jesus sends his disciples into the world to help God repair the brokenness caused by sin.

“Our Nation needs to do some “soul searching” on how to reduce violence.” The violence in our nation has caused many to mourn the loss of human lives. A young son of the mother killed in Sikh House of Prayer said, “Our mother brought us to this land of opportunity. Now my dreams are shattered.” May God guide and bless us to be the instruments of peace to create a world of people of different religions, ethnicities as “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”