

A Far Country

Acts 11:1-18 Psalm 148 Revelation 21:1-6 John 13:31-35

The headline last week read: "Mississippi To Allow Guns in Churches," which came just a few days after the story reporting world-wide weapons expenditures of over \$1.7 TRILLION last year alone, only to be followed a few days later with the story about the U.S. planning to spend over 1 TRILLION dollars over the next ten years on smaller, more versatile, nuclear weapons.....

The justifications are always the same: we need to be safe, we have a right to protect ourselves, we have an obligation to protect those we love.

And the question that hits me between the eyes is this one: "Is it time for us to ask again whether it's possible to be a Christian and to be complicit in violence?"

It's an old question among Christians.

In the early church, soldiers had to leave the military or they would not be baptized, because complicity in violence was not consistent with being a Christian.

That changed when St Augustine came up with the "just war" theory, giving a religious basis to violence, with loopholes and exceptions large enough to drive an armor plated Hum-Vee through.

And yet, just last week, the Vatican announced it is calling a forum to look again at the just war theory, perhaps with an eye on junking the whole thing.

The question of Christians and violence is a natural one this morning, not only because of the recent headlines, but because of our readings today too.

When you think about it, the source of violence begins when we start pitting us against them.

We do that all the time.

Whether it's "My Country Love It Or Leave It" or the tensions between different religious denominations or faiths or race or ethnic heritage, pitting "us" against "them" is as old as stone and as American as apple pie.

For the Jewish people, a big part of what defined them over and against others was their purity laws.

Only certain foods could be eaten, others were unclean — and all men had to be circumcised.

So the shocking message from God, in our first reading from Acts, is that there is no more "us" and no more "them."

.....It's just people!

Which is an outrageous thought, which is why Peter's friends are so mad at him: "The circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

When St Peter announces his vision that everything is now clean, that nothing is unclean, and everyone is welcome at God's table; even us grubby gentiles, his friends are beside themselves.

But Peter begins a theme that St Paul picks up on: in Christ, there is no more Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, and may we add, gay or straight, Muslim or Christian, Russian or Chinese, but that in some fantastic way, in ways that baffle and amaze, we are all one in Jesus, the face of the Living God....

Now that truth quickly gets lost when some folks decide to crack open the Book of Revelation, our second reading for today.

As you know, some fundamentalists love to use Revelation as a way to completely reinvent our faith, to take the Jesus who dies on the cross for everyone — and turn him into a sort of Rambo Jesus, ready to massacre his enemies while his friends watch with glee from the bandstand in heaven.

They look forward to a rapture where the lucky few will be taken up to heaven and, like spectators at the Roman colosseum back in the day, watch the rest of us endure horrific sufferings!

And so some folks have made millions writing books like The Left Behind series and The Late Great Planet Earth, all peddling fear and bloodbaths and carnage as the word of God.

But that's not what Revelation is about.

Revelation is not about a few going off to be with God, but with God coming to earth, to be with all of us.

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them..."

Revelation is not about the roaring lion; it's about the slaughtered lamb who is now in charge of all that is....a rule marked by service and love and compassion and unity....

It is the crucified one, who rejects all forms of violence, who willingly endures our violence, yet who never inflicts violence on anyone, this is the king of the universe.

Which is one thing to nod our head to on a sunny Sunday morning here in church, but what happens when airplanes fly into our towers or terrorists explode suicide vests in shopping malls or crackpots in North Korea threaten to send a nuke our way, or rampant racism makes so many second class citizens?

It's under those circumstances where we really need to stop, to resist the knee jerk reaction of responding to violence with violence, to remember who we are, and who we are called to become.

It was Chesterton who said that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, Christianity has been wanted yet rarely tried.

To be a faithful follower of Jesus means that we confront the violence of this world in a wholly new way, not with guns in our pews or ever deadlier nuclear bombs, but one that confronts brute force with soul force, as the old civil rights leaders say.

Just like Rosa Parks, the first lady of the civil rights movement, a woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, who was arrested and jailed for this non-violent act of resistance to the violence of institutional racism.

Her witness gave courage to the thousands who followed after her, into towns like Birmingham where young children were hit with fire hoses and attack dogs and into cities like Boston where school desegregation was met with vicious assaults on students simply seeking a decent education.

Just like 84 year old Sister Megan Rice, who "three years ago, carrying a backpack and a deeply held conviction that the United States was breaking international law by quietly keeping up a multibillion-dollar nuclear weapons program, [broke into]... a high security nuclear facility in Tennessee - the largest security breach in American atomic history.

Sister Megan's non-violent anti-nuclear action included walking through a wooded hill for two hours in the dark, crawling underneath four fences that had been cut through, and avoiding patrol cars, which resulted in her being sentenced to almost three years behind bars." The Guardian, 7/16/15.

This is the kind of witness to which we as Christians are called.

Indeed, we are called to be soldiers, but soldiers who follow one "who on the cross took violence on himself in order to conquer and embrace the enemy. The Lamb's rule is legitimized not by the sword but by his wounds..." Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, 300.

It's why we can and must say no to violence, no to massive expenditures on arms and their ingenious methods of destruction, no to endless wars and saber rattling.

As Christians who follow the slain lamb, it's our duty to let the government know "that the Church is not afraid of any earthly power, ..., because **more are for us than can ever be against us**. A **vast throng** no one could ever count, from **every** nation and **every** tribe, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white and bearing palms in their hands.... We are even now, whenever we summon the courage to confront the powers of violence, joining with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, shouting together, "**Victory to our God!**" Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

This is our call as followers of the Lamb.

There is so much to do, so little time: we dare not delay, and we dare not walk away.

For "the one who was seated on the throne says, 'See, I am making all things new.'" Rev. 21:6.

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