

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational,
UCC
6 Pentecost
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Things We Don't Talk Much about in Church
II. Violence in the Bible

Genesis 4:1-16
Psalms 44:1-8
Luke 22: 47-51

I wonder if any of you felt uncomfortable reciting the responsive psalm this morning? I know I did. It made me squirm to pray to a God who is also a warrior. Especially this morning, when our hearts are so anxious about the bloody mess in the Middle East, it was unnerving to praise God for choosing up sides and fighting with 'us' against 'them.'

If you were uncomfortable too, perhaps it was in part a matter of unfamiliarity. The passages from Scripture that we usually read in worship rarely confront us with frank expressions of violence. We don't have much practice grappling with Scripture's nasty streak. We almost always draw a discreet veil over it.

People sometimes ask me how ministers decide which Bible passages to preach each Sunday. Sometimes we choose them ourselves to fit a particular worship theme. But

most of the time, they are chosen for us from a three-year cycle of readings contained in a collection called 'The Revised Common Lectionary.' The lectionary is designed to expose us over time to a big chunk of the Bible.

A big chunk, but not all. The lectionary is not an exhaustive arrangement of all the passages in the Bible. And so if we preachers follow the lectionary faithfully, there will always be some biblical stories you never hear.

A colleague of mine once made up his mind to preach only on the passages of Scripture that the lectionary leaves out. If he had gone through with it, he would have taken his congregation on a bizarre trip. At times they would have been bored silly (have you ever read the genealogies in the Hebrew Scriptures?). At others they would have been, well, stimulated (ever read the erotica of the Song of Songs?). At still others, totally grossed out (ever read the story of—? Never mind.).

Every now and then a hair-raising text does get assigned as a Sunday reading, but in general the lectionary skips the truly horrific passages, like the ones feminist

biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble calls
'texts of terror.'

But even if the lectionary didn't silence the most vile episodes, a lot of us preachers would. One reason for this is spiritual laziness. It is hard work to preach on such passages and still convey the Good News. To get to the Good News, you have to expend a lot of energy keeping your lunch down while you're explaining the Bad News. And you sometimes end up preaching sermons that are longer, more didactic, and more demanding than most of us like to preach, and that most of you like to hear.

Now, to be sure, we don't shun violent passages just because it's easier and less nauseating to deal with texts that have more uplifting themes, like God's love and largesse, God's forgiveness and healing. It's also a theological and pastoral choice. We spend less time on gore and more on grace because we are persuaded that a non-violent message of love is the message our congregations and our world most need to hear. Thus, if we have a choice, our inclination is to preach positively, not to slog our way through X-rated stories that turn our stomachs and

make us embarrassed to call such awful stuff 'God's Word.'

Our ethical queasiness about the violence in Scripture has only intensified since 9/11. When the perpetrators of that horror claimed that they did it for God at God's command, and that God was thrilled about it, we were rightly revolted. At the same time, we couldn't help but recognize the familiar accents of that claim. Where had we heard them before? The extremists were speaking a language that our own texts and traditions have spoken fluently for 3,000 years.

Christians have not always been ethically troubled by violence in the Bible. Our recoil is a relatively new phenomenon, and not necessarily a universal one. Even today some Christians don't feel the slightest need to justify the Bible's violence or explain it away. Many Christians regard the Bible as literally true and free from error in every respect. Thus, if God appears wrathful in the scriptures, it isn't a metaphor or a human projection. God is wrathful. And there is plenty to be wrathful about. God is justifiably angry at human perversity, and so when God's love fails to convert us,

God's justice whips out warfare, enslavement, flood, and pestilence to chastise us and bring about our return to righteousness.

Conversion, salvation, the destruction of everything that opposes God's gracious will—for many Christians, here is the high purpose and deep meaning of the Bible's violence. In this light, the execution of Jesus is the central act of violence that God uses—and planned from the beginning—to establish eternal peace between God and sinful humans. For most biblical literalists, Scripture's violence is not an ethical aberration to be overcome, but a legitimate tool for accomplishing God's will.

What do you think about violence in the Bible?

Do you regard it as the product of the violent culture in which Scripture was written and therefore not something we should be too concerned about? Can it be passed over and sloughed off like so many other historical oddities that no longer apply?

Is it a psychological projection of human experience and behavior onto God? Is the biblical God innocent of bloodshed after all?

As you read the Bible, does it seem to you, as it does to some people, that God outgrows "his" violence as the scriptural story unfolds? Is the non-violent Christ the final word of God about this question?

Perhaps you spiritualize the bible's violence. You make it stand for something else—a symbol of the human struggle to master oneself, a way of talking about life's inevitable and vicissitudes or the life-long battle with our inner demons?

Maybe you place yourself among those who think that because the Bible has been used to authorize all sorts of appalling atrocities, the only thing to do is strip its offensive passages of their status as "God's Word" and rip them out of the Holy Book, never to be used in worship or prayer again?

I confess that I am all over the theological map on this matter. At one time or another, I have thought all these

things, and others. But if I had to summarize where I come down on the question right now, this very morning, I would make the following three observations – not as a solution, but as a prompt for further reflection.

My first observation is a disclaimer. Just because the Bible is full of violence doesn't mean that its violent texts endorse the morally troubling violence exhibited in them. By exhibiting violence, the Bible does not necessarily incite violence or glorify it. That's not to say that people and institutions have not thought so and followed what they believed to be the Bible's example, to horrible effect. It is only to say that I don't think that the Bible says it's okay to be violent as long as you do it for God's glory. Now, this may seem like a no-brainer, but in the current geopolitical climate it merits emphasis.

Second, the Bible is often spoken of as 'revelation.' If that is true, we should ask, What does violence in the Bible reveal? I think it reveals the character of violence as foundational to our human being. And it is critical to our chances of ever renouncing violence that we know

and believe this about ourselves. We need to stop inventing and investing in self-understandings that falsely present us to ourselves as innocent, self-understandings that too easily allow us to hide our own violence from ourselves.

Christian history is in part a bloodstained story. And that discovery—the shock and pain of it—is one reason that many people in recent years have left Christianity for other traditions with other texts that they see as less violent and more positive. With all due respect to them, and to those texts and traditions, I have always wondered if opting out of the frankly violent Biblical story is a self-disguised way of not facing responsibility for the violence of the world. As one writer put it, the power of positive thinking cannot rid us of the foundational violence that is part of who we are. It isn't possible to say, 'Gee, now that we see what awful stuff our ancestors did, we shall will ourselves into being more peaceful people and building more peaceful societies.'

Violence is basic to who we are, and we need to face it stripped of the illusion of innocence. We need an unobstructed view

of that truth, a mirror, that will tell us honestly that we are in it up to our eyeballs. And I wonder if the only kind of Scripture that can reveal this to us is one that talks about violence a lot; that throws it in our faces, as one person put it, in a hundred different ways—but even more importantly, that forgives us for it and heals us from it even as it throws it in our faces. And that Scripture is the Bible.

Which leads me to my final point. The Bible does not speak with one voice. It contains many different and discordant voices, witnesses and counter-witness. For every violent and dehumanizing text we find in the Bible, we find many more liberating, humane, radically merciful, healing and inclusive counter-texts.

In our first reading this morning, for example, we watch horrified as Cain kills Abel out of rivalry, but then we watch amazed as God refuses to let the shedding of a victim's blood go unnoticed on earth as it always does in our world. Abel's blood is said to cry out from the earth. God hears it. The victim will not be forgotten. But there's something more amazing to come—God will not exact

vengeance on the murderer. God protects Cain when our impulse would be to kill him. God acts to break one of the automatic mechanisms of violence to which we have become so accustomed, especially in these last days.

In the same way, in our second reading today Jesus commands, "No more of this!" to a violent disciple in the Garden—no more scapegoats, no more victims, no more cycles of revenge, "no more of this."

The juxtaposition of texts of terror with texts of truth and light can make it seem as if the Bible is "fighting with itself." And I think in a way it is. Philosopher Rene Girard has an apt phrase for this. He calls the Bible a "text in travail." It is a true revelation of peace but it is a revelation received by human beings who still have, as scripture puts it, 'ears without hearing and eyes without seeing'. So the story is, as another author writes, "a fitful one." But it's a story nonetheless that contains within its violent contours a relentless criticism of all forms of human violence and the picture of a God who is Love itself, even Love in the flesh in the man

we call Jesus the Christ, the prince of peace.

In this week when the violence in the world threatens us all as never before, his is the life, the ministry and the message we dwell on in hope. To his death and resurrection we cling. Under his mercy and by his grace, we repent of our own violence, pray fervently for peace, and work for justice wherever and whenever we can. Our faith demands it, our scriptures teach it, our hearts hope against hope for it. Let our daily prayer be, "No more of this. Amen."