

## Beyond the Violence

A Good Friday Sermon Based on Hebrews 10:16-25 and John 18-19

St. Martin's Episcopal Church and St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, Joint Service

Williamsburg, Virginia, March 29, 2013

We recoil from violence.

We draw back from it

without thinking.

When we see an act of violence,

it's just a gut reaction we have

to flinch, to run away, to escape.

You've noticed this reaction to pull away from violence if you've ever watched a boxing match or a particularly aggressive football game. It happens in that moment when the camera catches a glove breaking through human flesh. It happens in that moment when a linebacker rams into the quarterback, and the power of the body-blow moves like a freight train; the force of the impact knocks the quarterback to the ground, and we all watch in slow-motion as he falls to the ground, his head wobbling like a toy bobble-head before it ever hits the ground and then bobbles some more. At a moment like this, look around you, at the others who are watching alongside you, and you will see them cringe. They physically pull back, pulling away from the TV, recoiling from the violence they've seen. It's a natural human reaction, to want to escape violence. It's basic human survival. Fight or flight is the mechanism for perpetuating the species that is so deeply buried in our DNA that our self-protection is on display, even when we're merely watching a football game.

Everything about our bodies and minds is wired for self-protection, and even the youngest child knows that violence threatens a person. A violent act holds the potential for robbing us of the life that we're hardwired to preserve. From our cells, to our organs, to our brain chemistry, everything is designed to preserve the body.

And that's why we struggle on this day, on Good Friday, when we remember Jesus's hours of trial, torture and death. No matter what our minds know after years of instruction in Sunday School, our body-mind recoils from the violence of the forced march of Jesus, him being stripped of his clothes, the rough-handling, the whipping, the nailing of his flesh, the tearing of gravity, the dislocation of bones, the asphyxiation, the spearing.

With every act of violence that Jesus endures, our own bodies scream, run away, escape, this will kill you! Our bodies speak from the only reality they know. Violence kills. And so we expect Jesus, as a prophet like Elijah, to escape the violence. Or yet better than escaping violence, to vanquish it: we expect Jesus, as messiah, to overcome the violence, subduing it by force if necessary. We want God to play by human rules, conquering force by force, just as the Psalmist yearned: **8** Your hand will find out all your enemies; your right hand will find out those who hate you. **9** You will make them like a fiery furnace when you appear. The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them. **10** You will destroy their offspring from the earth, and their children from among humankind" (Psalm 21:8-10). Our desperation to be safe makes us willing to be less than the image of God, even if we must reduce God to violence.

Every year we approach the reading of Jesus' passion with a sliver of hope that perhaps the story will end differently. But no, escaping is not what Jesus the Son of God does. Neither does he resort to subduing by force. Rather, Jesus has something different in his DNA: instead of recoiling from violence, he moves into it and through it. Why? Because Jesus knows something that our bodies have no knowledge of -- that death is not final, that death is not the last word, that, in the words of the prayer, when our mortal bodies lie in death, there is yet a place for us eternal in the heavens. Jesus has the knowledge that, in death, our lives are

changed, not ended. To put it simply, Jesus remembers a time before the physical world even existed, and so his "DNA" remembers that life is not dependent on flesh.

Life is not dependent on flesh. In other words, our lives are not the sum total of our acts. They are not the sum total of our good deeds and bad deeds. Our lives are what God has made them to be, which is the opportunity to return love for love. God created us for the joy of loving, not just our loving but for his loving of us. God created us for no better purpose than to be loved by him, to enjoy the freedom of the beloved. Somehow we ended up as organic beings, so it is true that during part of our life we have fleshly bodies that get diseases, that are hurt by the actions of other; we have bodies that fail and indeed die. But our life is not the sum total of these bodies. Our life is bigger than our bodies, if you will.

And one day, one fine day, we will leave behind the cancer, the Alzheimer's, the pneumonia, the heart failure, the car crash, the gunshot; we will leave behind the thing that has caused our body to be done with its labor. And, like Jesus, we will move through death into life. Not because of who we are but because of who God is. Because God is eternal and treasures us, so we are eternal and will be treasured.

But, you may object, but I don't deserve it.

Yes.

But, I'm not good enough.

O.K.

The truth is that the violence caused by others is not the only violence we recoil from. We pull away also from the violence in our own hearts. We flinch when we recall the ways we have hurt others. We want to pull back from the memory of when we've hurt another person without meaning to do so. We flinch when we recall moments when we ourselves have been so hurt or angered that

we have lashed out and hurt someone with the express intention of making them feel the pain. We recoil from the violence that is in us, the violence done by us, and the violence done on our behalf. After all, a nation can't survive very long before it puts the priority on its own survival, even if it means killing others. We are aghast at the violence within us, violence that puts human beings on crosses.

If reap what we sow, then we don't deserve anything other than death: for, dust you are and to dust you shall return. Yet God treasures us, and God shows us, through himself in Jesus, that we need *not* shrink back from violence. That violence is not the last word, that life is the last word; that love is the last word. That our God, who is life and love, is powerful enough to move past human violence to show divine mercy; to demonstrate that our human violence crumbles to dust in the face of God's eternity; that God, who is eternal and omni-potent nonetheless has poor short-term memory. God's own testimony of is that he won't remember our sins; that he won't remember our "lawless deeds."

And if God chooses to have poor short-term memory, who are we to object?

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Our sins are not the issue. God has chosen to forgive those sins. So the only question remains, will you choose to forgive your sins? Will you choose to accept that no offering for sin is necessary (Hebrews 10:16-25)? Will you choose to leave the violence behind and "approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with [your] hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and [your] bodies washed with pure water?" Will you allow God to treasure you?

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has [not flinched from our violence] is faithful."