

Christ's Only Commandment

John 13: 31-35

Fifth Sunday in Easter/ 6th May 2007/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

When Hollie Einolf asked me several weeks ago if our Middle Schoolers could plan and lead a service in response to what they've been discussing on Sunday mornings, I said sure. When I looked at the lectionary texts for this fifth Sunday in Eastertide, especially the gospel lection, it seemed this was an appropriate Sunday to address the problem of violence in American society and the Christian response.

But I want to be careful. Life is complicated and complex, like these issues, because the human heart is dreadfully complicated and complex. Before love can become the answer, love must first pose a few questions.

Some in our age are under the dangerous illusion that defeating evil is simply a matter of striving to be good; all we have to do is be good. Some argue that the problem of violence can be solved by being more loving or tolerant. Christians are supposed to be known for their love, but I know a lot of violent Christians. Many Christians act this way, I believe, because we refuse to confront our own hearts of darkness. We move too quickly from Good Friday to Easter without going through Holy Saturday, we go from violence the problem right to love the solution, from hurt right to forgiveness, from evil right to goodness, rarely stopping long enough in between to grieve and in grieving learn the deeper truths facing us. Soon after the tragic events at Virginia Tech last month, even the next day, there were services and rallies to stir the soul and encourage people to move on, to return to normalcy, and far too many commentators offering simplistic explanations why this tragedy occurred. I heard James Dobson's wife, Shirley, say on CNN this week that if we had the Ten Commandments posted in all of our classrooms this evil would not have occurred in Blacksburg. Is it really that simple?

After 9-11, we never stopped as a nation to ask the question why the terrorists really hate us or wondered how many in the Middle East see us, why are we perceived as a threat? To even raise these questions was considered un-American, then and maybe even now. In the recent documentary, *Why We Fight*, respected journalists, like Dan Rather, confessed they weren't free to ask such

questions.¹ Similarly, what happened at Virginia Tech should be the occasion for us to examine the level of violence in American culture, to confront it openly, honestly, and to learn from it for the sake of the ones who died. Jesus said the truth is always liberating; living in the dark, living in ignorance and illusion can cost you your life. Sure, Seung-hui Cho was seriously mentally ill and in a lot of inner turmoil. But we can't dismiss it all to mental illness, because it doesn't do justice to the violent rage that was consuming his life for years, as a seriously broken human being. Nor can we point at him and say, *There is evil*. Wasn't there some good along with all that evil within him, even as we are all filled with both good and evil? Did the mental illness cause the violence or did his inner rage trigger his mental illness? Psychologists are not sure; it's difficult to say.

Dismissing his horrific act as only mental illness prevents us from seeing the level of violence and silent rage present within American society. It is there, buried under the surface, but it comes out in surprising ways – like road rage on the beltway. We are the wealthiest country on the planet, the wealthiest nation the world has ever witnessed and yet it's not enough. The American psyche is troubled; disturbed, because all of this wealth and comfort and luxury, while not bad, does not feed the soul or satisfy the human heart. I think we're angry, but don't want to say so or can't. Many men, in particular, are silently raging, angry, and suffering silently with depression, but won't say so or can't. Why does the United States have the highest homicide rate of any other Western nation? Why are we known as being one of the most violent nations in the world? Why do we allow the purchase of handguns? We're one of the few Western nations still using the death penalty. Several years ago I was in Rehoboth Beach and was appalled by the sight of a large plastic electric chair in front of one of the stores on the boardwalk. For a few quarters you could get a shock. I was sickened by that. But people just walked by – with their children – and weren't offended by it or didn't see it. I wanted to take a sledge hammer to it and crack it into a million pieces. A violent reaction, to be sure, but at least I was in touch with my anger.

The violence is so pervasive that we've become numb to it, desensitized to it. I grew up with years of Saturday mornings watching the Road Runner, Tom and Jerry, and Elmer Fudd with his rifle hunting for rabbits, when it dawned on me one day what I was really watching and just how violent those shows are. We can't blame Bugs Bunny or Warner Brothers, but a constant diet of those images has an effect upon us. The aggression is everywhere – vicious video

¹ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0436971/> and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_We_Fight_\(2005_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_We_Fight_(2005_film))

games, games of war and destruction, where killing people becomes entertainment. Go to Blockbuster and look at the films being made. Our former moderator, Rick Ufford-Chase warns about this growing culture of violence, and cautions us against the way redemptive violence is too often the norm in reacting to injustice. Violent music, with hard, caustic sounds, violent art, and violent images on television or in the theatre bombard the psyche and wound the soul. Now, merely getting rid of all this is not the solution, because we need to remember we're creating these images and sounds and actions, the products of the same psyche that's trying to say it's in trouble.

Add to this the images of war on television or on the radio, of the untold violence and unimaginable violence being inflicted in Iraq. Does it really bother us? There is a strange, unhealthy unreality to this war that allows us to become detached from what's going on. We become dead to the violence. We become anesthetized to what's happening all around us.

Maybe this is why many couldn't see that Don Imus did anything wrong in verbally abusing the Rutgers women's basketball team. Language is one of the most potent weapons in our arsenal of violence that we use against others, yet we've become numb to its impact. Sticks and stones can break bones, but names might hurt the most because they wound the soul – and the soul takes a long time to heal, if ever. It's easy to see why victims become terrorists or executioners. This is not to excuse, but to understand. The verbal assault, the name calling, the deriding that goes on today in the public square, or at school, or at home is sickening. Words are sacred. When they are defamed, words can sting and destroy and forever wound the human heart. But words have the power to restore and heal and offer hope to the human heart. To say, "I love you" to someone and really mean it; to hear someone say, "I love you," and receive what they say as true is, in truth, a gift of grace. I've know far too many people who never hear these words or are treated without the honor such words imply. That's what everyone hungers for and deserves, including Seung-Hui Cho. Violence makes us hungrier still.

Jesus said, a new commandment I give you – his only commandment: love one another. Even Paul said the only law for the Christian is love – that's it (Romans 13:8). Augustine (354-430), sublime: "Love and do what you wish." The moralists and legalists might balk at this, but it is true. This was Jesus' message, which many of his own followers fail to fulfill. Christians aren't free from violence. In fact, far too many Christians are very violent and even nasty toward other Christians and those who aren't. It's alarming. I wonder if part of

the problem is the way Christians *hear* Jesus' command to love. Maybe because we think Christians should be nice, accepting, forgiving, completely loving all the time, 24/7, feeling in such a way, acting in such a way, conforming to this ideal "What Would Jesus Do," trying to live up to such a high standard that we know in our hearts is unreachable. So we bury what we're really feeling and deny what we're feeling, being nice when we know we aren't, behaving when we're really raging inside, acting like we're never sad, never depressed, never lost or confused, when deep within our hearts are breaking and we're sinking deeper into despair, and we've lost our way and are fearful, but we don't want other Christians to find out. When Christians live this way, I believe, they are inflicting untold violence toward themselves and everyone else. This has nothing to do with love.

The love Jesus invites us to share is more than being nice or polite. It's never sentimental. It's more than having cozy feelings and warm fuzzies for one another. It's more than being civil, getting along. Perhaps we need to think of Jesus' words here less as a commandment, than a statement of wisdom. We hear, "love one another" as if it was a rule – you better or else you'll be judged. But, as is so often the case in Greek, much depends upon the tiny words. The tiny word overlooked here is "as;" *kathos* in Greek.² "*Just as* I have loved you, love one another." Jesus is saying more than just imitate me, do as I do. No one is like Jesus. We're setting ourselves up for failure every time. This love has nothing to do with us; we can't find it within our hearts which are troubled and conflicted, as Calvin (1509-1564) knew. The kind of love Jesus invites us toward can only be found in relationship with him. "As I have loved you," Jesus said. When we abide and dwell in his love, when we *receive* it, when Christ's love is flowing through us, it's unlike anything we could ever concoct on our own from our own moral resources (which we know are inadequate). Our capacity to love, sacrificially, seeking the best in and for all people, lifting people up instead of putting people down, affirming them, rejoicing and celebrating them overflows from God's love in us. And we act this way not because we have to, but because we want to. This is a different kind of love, not just a "souped-up version of human love."³ It's *agape*; it's a gift; we only live this way through grace.

The early church father Tertullian (c.155-230) overheard a pagan contemporary of his who was shocked by the amount of love within the

² Insight of F. Dale Bruner. See <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>.

³ <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>.

Christian community. He said, “Look at how much they love each other,” for that was not the way of Roman society, which was a ruthless and violent civilization. The truth of that statement – then and now – has nothing to do with being morally superior or sinless or free from evil, but because somehow, then and now, we know the love of Jesus in our hearts, we know we are loved by him – in (and especially in) our brokenness – and because that love is there and only because it is there, can it be said a Christian loves with the love of God. If we are lacking love, it’s not because we’re not trying hard enough, it might be because we don’t know what it’s really like to be one loved by God. If we are lacking love as a church or society, it’s not because we’re not trying hard enough, but it might be that we’re very far away from knowing who we are in God, as one loved by God. Perhaps here at his table we will know the love of our Lord.

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