

April 22, 2007
Psalm 30, Acts 9:1-9
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“Threats of Violence and Promises of Peace”

Flannery O'Connor once commented about the Apostle Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.” (“The Habit of Being,” p. 355) Her comment certainly captures the determined, almost bull-headed, character of the man who, next to Jesus, dominates the New Testament. In fact, almost one half of the New Testament writings are associated with his name and many come from his own hand. The Book of Acts tells the story of the transformation of the Saul into Paul, “the Apostle to the Gentiles.” Paul bore witness to the Gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Turkey to Greece and from Palestine to Rome. Through Paul, the gospel spread from its beginnings in the Jewish culture of Jerusalem to the Greek culture of the Roman world.

Luke tells us that Saul was “breathing threats” of violence against the early followers of Jesus. Saul believed it was his particular calling to put a stop to the blasphemy of these early Christians. He carried letters from the religious authorities in Jerusalem which allowed him to take these followers of Jesus to Jerusalem for trial. He inspired fear in the hearts of all who heard his name.

It would be hard for us to understand how someone, in the name of God, could threaten violence and persecution except for the fact that we have seen so much of it. While the Book of Acts may tell of Jewish efforts to crush the emerging Christian movement, hundreds of years of Western history tell the story of Christian efforts to destroy the Jewish faith through inquisitions, pogroms and holocausts. The crusaders fought brutal battles in the name of God to regain the Holy Land; in the course of the crusades, the soldiers pillaged Europe and the Middle East and even fought against one another and almost destroyed the Byzantine Empire. History also tells a tale of violence within the Christian tradition between orthodox and catholic, protestants and catholics and among various protestant sects. The name of Jesus has even been used to cover hatred against ethnic and racial groups by such organizations as the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Now Muslims fight Christians and Christians fight Muslims; Sunni Muslims battle Shiite Muslims. The civilian death toll continues to rise in Iraq. Before we are too quick to condemn other faiths for the use of violence to serve some political or ideological agenda, we need to examine our own history, prejudices and beliefs. If we could learn one thing from this tragic history of human failure to live up to the best of our religious beliefs, it would be to renounce the use of all violence and coercion deployed in the name of God. Surely, Jesus, the prince of peace, would never sanction the use of violence to further the church or the coming Kingdom of God.

Violence in the name of God seems to be but one aspect of the staggering amount of violence in the world in which we live. Much of the time, we hear so much about violence that we are numb to it. The terrible events of this past week awakened us to the threats of violence that simmer below the surface of our own nation. Alienation, rage, drugs, poverty, racism, sociopathic behavior and even religious fanaticism threaten the peace of our land. In Houston, Texas, a worker at the Johnson Space Center shoots and kills his supervisor over a bad review. In Virginia, a disturbed, enraged student at Virginia Tech kills 32 students and teachers before taking his own life.

Several days ago, I received an e-mail from one of our Korean members who has recently moved to California. I want to share with you some of his thoughts about the tragedy in Virginia: “It is a sad time that we have heard the news of so many young lives cut short by act of brutality by a troubled young man. The news from South Korea is that Korean people are in so much shock and horror that an immigrant from Korea has committed such horrible deeds. All are feeling sad and sorry for the families of those young men and women whose lives have been taken away.” This member contrasts the warm reception he received when he arrived in Indianapolis to the troubles and bullying Cho experienced.

“I looked back to my college days back in the late 1980s. I came to Indianapolis from South Korea. I did not know anybody. But by the grace of the Lord, I was surrounded by the wonderful hospitality of people of Indianapolis, such kind-

ness and caring they showed for which I am always grateful. So, upon hearing what my friend told me and looking back on my college days, I asked myself, 'What if he were received with more kindness and love?'

"I know how hard it would be for those who lost loved ones and those who are still in shock to have compassion on that troubled young man and his family, and how much harder to forgive. But I couldn't help but shed tears from being moved so much when I read that, at Virginia Tech's Memorial Ground, a stone was laid for the troubled young man [too]...and that the bell rang thirty three times for the lost lives. I feel that it touches our heart the deepest when we hear of the ultimate loving act of our Lord carried out by those who understand what it means, forgiving the unforgivable." (Jeong-Ho Lee)

His e-mail touches the power of what Saul experienced on the road to Damascus. He was on his way to Damascus with threats of violence and he encountered promises of peace. He encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" For the first time, he realized that the God he had always known and worshipped was the same as Jesus. He came to confess Jesus as Lord. Paul came to a new understanding of the God he had always known, loved and worshipped. He came to see Jesus, not as a misguided man who blasphemed against God, but as the Son of God. Saul's transformation is pictured as a kind of death and resurrection. For three days he was in darkness, unable to see. He had to be led into the city of Damascus. For three days he does not eat or drink.

When Paul's vision was restored, he came to see his calling in a new way. He came to embrace the faith he once despised. He came to a new mission for his life. When Jesus encountered Paul on the road to Damascus, he called him to be God's "instrument" or "vessel" to bring the gospel to the whole world. The one who had inflicted suffering on the followers of Jesus would now suffer for the sake of Jesus

Yet, the peace of Christ will keep Paul in the midst of the violence that he too will face. Paul will write to the Corinthians about his own troubles. In his life as a Christian, Paul will face beating, imprisonment, stoning, dishonor and insults. He will discover that the secret of his strength will be the peace of Christ that dwells within him and enables him to face the violence and persecution of his time. Near the end of his life, Paul will write to the Philippians, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

As we come face to face with the violence of our time, it is the promise of Christ's peace that keeps us. Sometimes, the troubles we face may come as the result of our witness for Jesus; sometimes they come simply as the result of the brokenness, pain and alienation of our society. However trouble comes, it is not the time for us to hide our heads in sand and do nothing. It is not the time for us to give into the violence by seeking revenge or by living in fear. Surely, it is the time to witness to our faith that, no matter what happens to us, our lives are safe in God's peace. Surely, it is time to witness to our faith that God gives us peace even in the midst of a world of violence.

A fellow alumnus of my college and seminary, Rev. Alex Evans, is the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Blacksburg, Virginia, and the chaplain to the city police. I have always known the Alex to be a person of courage and faith. A recent article in the "New York Times" described how he was on the scene with the police, counseling traumatized students, encouraging the officers and rescue workers and meeting with the families of victims as they arrived. He refused to give in to the despair and the chaos of the moment. The "Times" wrote that, "he had been able to show both the police officers and victims' relatives who are suffering that they were not alone and that they were not without God." "I think God is crying with all those who are crying and giving encouragement to all those giving encouragement," he said, "and urging us to find ways to make a safer, more peaceful society." ("New York Times," April 19, 2007).

Those of us who have come to know Christ have been given the greatest resource for healing the violence in our own hearts and the violence in our land. With his peace in our hearts, we can reach out to comfort, heal and restore the victims of violence. We have sent \$4000 from our congregation to help provide long-term spiritual and emotional counseling to the students and staff of Virginia Tech. We cannot and do not stop there.

The peace of Christ also leads us to work with courage and persistence for a more peaceful society by ensuring that ad-

equate laws are in place and procedures followed to insure that guns do not fall into the hands of disturbed persons. There is some evidence that if proper procedures had been followed, it would have been far more difficult than it was for Cho to purchase guns. Our nation can no longer afford to be casual about such matters of public safety and health.

With Christ's peace in our hearts, we can be more intentional about practicing the kind of hospitality that our member said he received when he arrived in this country from Korea. When we are secure in Christ, we do not need to build walls between ourselves and others who are different from us; with Christ in our hearts we can build bridges of understanding and community.

With Christ's peace in our hearts, we can teach our children how to resolve differences peacefully, how to stop bullying, how to appreciate people who are different from them and, perhaps most importantly, how to forgive.

In a world filled with threats of violence, God has given us the promise of peace.

Benediction:

Deep peace of the running waves to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the smiling stars to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the watching shepherds to you.

Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you. (Gaelic Blessing)