

“Suffering the Fear of Violence”

Good Friday, April 18, 2014, 7:30 p.m.

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

The names and stories are too familiar.

Oscar Pistorius, the South African Paralympic athlete who killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp; and whose on-going trial is to decide whether it was a case of mistaken identity or out-of-control rage.

Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston bombers who, one year ago, killed three people and injured 264.

Adam Lanza, whose rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012 killed 20 children, six administrators and his own mother.

We live in a world of violence. My father, a retired state trooper with a full career in civilian law enforcement, and I regularly discuss the litany of carnage that seems to surround us each day. Is it that the world has become more violent or that we now know immediately what we might not have known for days, weeks or months, if ever? Who knows?

What I do know is that we suffer the fear of violence. I remember after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001 that many news reports observed that the world had changed forever. A colleague observed that the world had not changed at all, but simply that we had experienced the violence that much of the world knows each day.

The world has been violent a long time. John Calvin, the 16th century Protestant reformer, asserted that humanity was essentially depraved. At times this seems a far more persuasive view of human nature than our Wesleyan heritage of free-will that leads to the choice of holy living. Good Friday seems victorious over Easter. Certainly the theologically liberal notion of the inexorable progress of humankind, a notion I yearn to embrace, for our generation lies in the ashes of Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz and dozens of less notorious death camps with no less deadly results.

We can make our own list. My alertness is no longer limited to trips to Boston or New York. “See something, say something” has had its effect on me. Especially when I am on or around the train, I watch everything, every place, everybody.

Did you notice, in the passion reading, that the first act of overt violence in the story is one of Jesus’ own disciples, Peter, cutting off the ear of the slave of the high priest. The violence comes from Jesus’ own band, and Jesus immediately and unequivocally repudiates it.

He also repudiates the institutional violence of his captors, who arrest him under the cover of darkness when “*day after day I sat in the temple teaching and you did not arrest me.*” It is worth noting that the violence perpetrated against Jesus is done under the aegis of the rule of law. Though essential to a civilized society, law cannot save us from violence or the fear thereof.

This past Tuesday I had the privilege of taking my son Adam and his friend Katie to see “All the Way,” the story of President Lyndon Baines Johnson now playing at the Neil Simon theatre. It is the story of LBJ, played by Bryan Cranston (star of the tv series “Breaking Bad”), and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Again and again throughout the play, the “rules” (translate “laws”) of Congress are used to circumvent change in the laws of the individual Southern states that inflicted violence on their own citizens because of the color of their skin: all in the name of law.

In Jesus’ story, whatever degree of legitimacy one accords the tribunal before which Jesus was questioned is dismantled by the abuse inflicted against him. To be spat upon, struck and slapped is as fresh as the treatment of American blacks during segregation or, more currently, detainees at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison.

Now let me go from preachin’ to meddlin.’ Have you ever felt “They ought to be slapped?” Have you ever said, “I ought to slap you?” I have. It frightens me every time I feel it and shames me in those (thankfully) rare moments when I have dared to say it. Do you notice

with me that such feelings and voice are often toward those who are weaker: the child, the older adult, the infirmed? We are not so quick to consider slapping the judge, the police officer, the gang member or the body builder, are we? Never mind the legitimacy of our grievance or the level of our frustration! We, too, are part of the violence that surrounds and invades us. We, too often, number among those who say “*Prophesy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?*” The Great Adversary would like nothing more than that we should nurture those feelings, consoling ourselves that they are normal—which they are—and that everyone feels them and they are nothing to be ashamed of. Yet on another day when the sun shone and Jesus taught the multitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, he made clear the link between insults, anger and the slippery slope toward violence (Matthew 5:21-26); and that his followers were to choose a different way. Forewarned is forearmed.

Where does this leave us? On Good Friday, it leaves us with the consequences of violence: broken bodies, broken lives and death. Yet things are not always as they seem. Again and again, in the face of violence, we also hear of those who respond by putting themselves in harm’s way, sacrificing health and sometimes life to end it. Do you ever wonder, as I do, “*What would I have done?*” at one of these moments. We can never know until, God forbid, we are there. Perhaps you have been and already know.

What we do know is that we must seek to be among those who resist violence, in ways small and large. The Easter promise that awaits declares that God has overcome the worst we can do. For today, Good Friday, it will have to be sufficient to know that our sins are such as nailed Jesus upon the cross; to hear Christ’s reproaches to his faithless church; and to seek his mercy. In the soil of humility is planted the seed of love, love that became obedient even to death on the cross; the perfect love, as the scripture says, that casts out fear. (1 John 4:18) Amen.