

VIOLENCE ENDS AT HOME

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
May 13, 1984

I Peter 2:19-25

Today is a festival, the Festival of the Christian Home. It is not easy to establish and maintain a Christian home these days. Our society is against us. Many pressures and problems impinge upon family life; one which threatens to destroy families, in fact, which threatens to destroy our very existence as a civilized society, is violence.

Morris West in his novel, Clowns of God, writes, "Violence is as infectious as the Black Death." The Black Death, a plague of unbelievable proportions, when it came would spread unchecked. It occurred periodically throughout the Middle Ages, and even into our own century, indiscriminately destroying families, caring not if mothers and children died. In some places 2/3 of the population died from plague. The plague was not checked until it was discovered that rats were the carriers.

Violence is like the plague, infectious, indiscriminate, a killer. Violence is attacking our homes and the very foundations of our society. I'm sorry if you expected sweetness and light on this Mother's Day, but we're dealing with a plague.

A violent crime--murder, rape, robbery, assault--occurs every 24 seconds in our country. Rape essentially is a crime of violence; the sexual aspect is incidental. Rape is not just an isolated experience in a victim's life, for women experience trauma that is long-standing. They experience trauma not only from the assault, but from the treatment they receive from police, hospitals, the public and the courts. Protests, marches are held, not for the victim, but for the assaulters! A Wisconsin judge gave probation to a man 24 years old who had raped a five-year-old girl. The judge said of the five-year-old girl, "She was an unusually sexually permissive young lady." Five years old! And the judge continued, "He (the 24-year-old man) did not know enough to refuse." The victim is the guilty one!

And there is violence in the home. Spouse abuse, wife beating, is now considered to be one of the most frequent and underreported crimes in the United States. And child abuse is intolerable. Every four hours, a child dies from being beaten. In the United States, 2,000 children die every year from being beaten; 10,000 are severely battered; 75,000 are sexually abused.

Violence is like a plague, spreading unchecked across our land, across the world. What is the reaction of our society?

We encourage violence. Not only do we condone violence, we encourage it. While driving, I heard a radio commercial for a TV comedy. The dialogue went something like this. "Child abuse is not just found in the ghetto." "Right, yeah, but rich people don't have to do their own beating. They have their chauffeur do it." That is comedy??? Every four hours a child dies from abuse, and we make jokes. We are sick! We encourage violence. Violent TV shows increase the level of violence some 16% every year, and the Department of Health and Human Services studies show that a consensus among scientists believes there is a cause-and-effect relationship between televised violence and aggression. We encourage violence.

We legalize violence. The Supreme Court has declared that state-sanctioned killing of human beings is a valid, if not final, form of punishment. Killing, the taking of human life, the ultimate in violence, is legal.

We believe, we trust in violence; we revere violence. We glibly prepare for the last word in violence: the extinction of the human race and the destruction of the planet through nuclear weapons, believing that the threat of violence prevents or deters violence. Admiral Rickover said it eloquently and soberly, "The arms race, the struggle to remain potentially more violent than our violent enemy, is so far out of control that the human race will probably blow itself up in a nuclear war."

Where will the madness stop? Every weapon that has ever been invented has been used! Can we stop the madness? Yes, but not with violence! Do you deter violence by using violence? Do you put out fire with more fire? Does more violence eradicate less violence? Do you stop a plague with more plague?

The time has come, and this is my plea this Mother's Day, that we rid the earth of this plague, that we root out violence as a way of life, and that we begin at home. My plea this morning is that we try a brand new way, never before tried on a large scale, tried in isolated places and in small ways by segments of the church, but rarely taken seriously. My plea is that we take Jesus seriously and live our lives without violence.

Jesus lived an ethic far beyond the understanding of his time and far beyond the understanding of our time. Yet, it is our privilege, our opportunity to claim the example of Jesus for our time. Jesus lived, as well as taught, "They who live by the sword will die by the sword." They who live by violence will die by violence. Our epistle lesson this morning, from I Peter, encourages us to endure suffering, especially when you have done what is right, and God will bless you for it. Peter writes, "Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example, so that you would follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no one ever heard a lie come from his lips. When he was insulted, he did not answer back with an insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but placed his hopes in God, the righteous Judge." Jesus refused to meet violence with violence. Jesus refused to respond to violence with violence. He did not answer back to insults. He did not hit back. He did not threaten. And, said Peter, "He left you an example, so that you would follow in his steps."

Let's follow Jesus' example and begin to stop the plague by ending violence at home. The family is an arena where we can have an effect. The home is where we learn about living. Let's take Jesus seriously in our relationships with not only one another in the church, but in our relationships with our families.

Let's eliminate violence from our language. How common are such phrases, "I could kill you...I'll knock your block off." Language conditions behavior. Language programs our brains. Our words program our actions. That is why Paul urges us to fill our minds with what is lovely, kind, pure.

Let's eliminate violence from our responses. Conflict is inevitable in any relationship, especially in the home between spouses, parents and children, grandparents and parents. Conflict is inevitable, but violent methods are not inevitable. There are other ways to handle conflict. Erma Bombeck suggests that one way to end war is to send mothers into the battles, with their arms crossed, their chins set firmly, and that "look" in their eyes. Did your mother stop you cold in your tracks with that look?

Let's eliminate violence as an option, and this includes spanking. Let's banish spanking and relegate it to the cave-man era. For, do you stop violence with violence? Picture a father spanking a child while saying, "I'll teach you to hit your brother." Ask yourself, "What does spanking teach a child?" Spanking teaches a child three things:

1) Spanking teaches a child to wait until he gets bigger, and then he can hit back. It teaches a child that violence is especially effective when you're big, when you're an adult. The immediate response is often a sullen resentment, "Just you wait until I'm bigger; I'll show you." And such a child often does show them: resentment against teachers, police.

2) Spanking teaches a child to obey and be good, not out of family loyalty, not out of a desire to cooperate for the good of the family, not for any rational reason, but out of fear of being hit. Spanking teaches a child that violence is the motivation for obeying. This, then, means that the child as a youth or adult will obey only when the threat of violence is there, by the police or by the army on a large scale. Citizenship is not then a matter of loyalty, respect or cooperation, but fear of police and army.

3) Spanking teaches a child that problems between people, conflict between people and nations, is resolved by violence, by hitting, beating, spanking.

The difference between child battering, child abuse and spanking is only a matter of degrees. The difference between violence in the home and nuclear war is a matter of progression, a matter of infectious plague.

Let's replace violence in the home--violent language and violent acts--with affection, touching, hugging and words of love. Let's touch in tenderness, not in violence. Let's hug, not hit. As humans we need the words of love, and we need the expression of love through physical touching and hugging. We starve and yearn to be touched. Arms were made for hugging. Leo Buscaglia, the popular lecturer on love, tells of a young woman in one of his classes who lamented, "It's funny, but no one hesitates touching a baby and patting or hugging a strange dog. And here I sit sometimes dying to have someone touch me, and no one does." At that she got down on her hands and knees, crawled around the room, barked like a dog, and received pats and hugs. Violence sometimes erupts from a love-starved person. Your children need hugs, your spouse needs hugs. Husbands, I challenge you to adopt a policy: hug your wife three times a day and tell her at least once a day, "I love you." You might see a miracle in your home. Fathers, hug your children. Let's replace violence with hugging.

The plague of violence can be checked. Love can eradicate violence. The example of Jesus is our guide and goal. Let's end violence, beginning at home.

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