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The Violence of God's Love

Matthew 5:6; Luke 16:16

From its first day, Christianity had a violent, shattering impact upon the world. People should have gleaned this fact from the first moment wild man John the Baptist burst on the scene, dressed in camel-hair and eating locusts, doing strange things like dunking people in the Jordan river to symbolize their imminent, radical, violent change of life. John said strange things, too, that though he baptized people with water, the One coming after him would baptize with fire.

When the Christ came, in the unexpectedly obscure form of a Galilean carpenter's son, he came, as advertised, speaking a Word of fire capable of turning fishermen into preacher boys, tax collectors into trumpeters of love, a Word strong enough to pull a wicked little man out of a tree and turn him into a host for the presence of God, powerful enough to transform a timid soul who kept his faith hidden at night into a sunlight believer who boldly claimed the dishonored Christ from the rugged cross of Roman justice.

Christ spoke a violent, fiery Word that made the blind see, the lame men walk, set prisoners free and turned a fierce opponent of Christ's church into one of its most effective proponents.

Christ's Word wrought reconciliation between God and humanity, between humanity and itself.

This Word proclaimed a violent grace: though your sins be red as scarlet,

Christ promised to turn your soul as white as snow.

Yet, even as we receive this violent grace, we are expected to share it and extend it to our enemies.

This violent love of God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This violent love never ends. Rather, this Word of violence annihilates categories:

in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile.

Christ's Word obliterates all categories by which we might compartmentalize people -- and forbids us to erect new ones.

This violent Word of God makes us one promise:

if anyone is in Christ, he or she is being made a new creature.

To be in Christ is to be about the process of being made new!

All of this, the power of reconciliation, the power of transformation, the power of grace and forgiveness, the power to obliterate categories -- all of this is what our Lord meant when he said,

"The Law and the prophets were under John, but, since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone who enters it, enters it violently."

Our Lord declares,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be satisfied.

What do those words mean to us?

Do we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Do we truly hunger and thirst for God's Word to make a difference in our lives?

Do we truly hunger and thirst to make a violent difference in this world?

One of the great preachers of old, Elton Trueblood, told of an Ohio lawyer who grew up in a Christian home, but for whom the Christian faith meant nothing for most of his life.

He nominally attended services, gave virtually nothing of himself to his faith, did nothing truly spiritual. His whole life was devoted to his law practice – at which he was very successful. But in his early 40's, though successful by every worldly standard, he knew himself to be a failure. His self-sufficiency was a sham; he hungered and thirsted for a power to liberate him from his weakness. Through the ministry of Alcoholics Anonymous, he had a genuine, profound encounter with the living God, and the violence of Christ's love turned him into a wonderful father, a faithful husband, and a tireless church worker who took up the role of lay preacher, delivering messages almost every Sunday at a boys' home, a nursing center or a penitentiary. Elton Trueblood said this man suddenly felt an incredible hunger for righteousness, thirsted to do good, to be of service, to make a mark in the world with the violence of his love. Ironically, after a half-dozen years of living in this manner, he was stricken with a fatal illness that swiftly took his life. But his greatness could not be measured by time. Indeed, it was only in those last half-dozen years that he considered himself to have lived at all. The key point is this: this Ohio lawyer had reached a stage in life where only a violent change could make any real difference in his life. Having just a little more faith, drinking a little less whisky, giving a little more to the church, attending services a little more frequently wouldn't have helped him a bit. God had to change his life violently if this man was going to alter the direction of his existence.

Many of us grow up in households where church is important, a wonderful blessing. We come to know the love of God through loving teachers, friends, mentors and ministers. Somewhere along the way many of us make a public profession of faith, perhaps to blend in, perhaps to please our parents or grandparents. But to what degree, really, does the genuine, violent love of God touch our being? Church becomes a habit, and faith does, too. There is nothing wrong with that. A healthy life comes from healthy habits. But is our faith *only* a habit? When we go off to college, or find a new job, or move to a new city, does that change in our habitat result in a change in our habits? Does our participation in a community of faith cease to matter? Maybe when we find someone to whom we can give our life, or maybe when new life is born into our household, and we realize that we need guidance from above to nurture this new gift, maybe then we go back to church. Nothing wrong with that, either. Such a story is a path worn smooth by millions of lives. But that path can be just a little too smooth. At some point, for your faith to make a profound difference in your life, you must have a genuine hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, and God's violent grace must touch you in the depth of your being. I suspect Trueblood's lawyer friend had long been hungering for righteousness and did not consciously know it. Then when he sensed that hunger, he may have tried to squelch it, seeing it as a sign of weakness. But spiritual hunger is not a sign of weakness but of health. Only sick people have no appetite. A spiritually hungry person is a healthy person. God's righteousness can fill that hunger and change our lives.

The healthiest, truest Christians are called to never be satisfied with staying on one plateau of understanding and practice. We are called never to be complacent. We are called, as Paul phrased it, to strive for the upward call of Christ. We are called to break out of our faith of habit. We are called as a church to act violently to bring new believers into the Kingdom of God. We are called as a church to inspire bored people and transform them into active servants of Christ.

The theologian who opened my eyes to the violent nature of God's love was the late Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, who ministered to people caught in a war-stricken society. In his troubled, class-ridden, impoverished Third World, brutal, physical violence was normalcy. He said to his people, the only way we can change the brutal normalcy of our world is through an in-breaking of God's love.

Revolutionaries on the left and the right were trying to effect their forms of righteousness in his country, but their righteousness turned out to be only variant violent forms of revenge. Romero said to his nation, if we are going to save our country and survive, we must embrace Jesus' revolution, a violence of love, a violence of peace. a good violence that does away with the normal brutality of the world and turns swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and studies war no more, so people can live. He asked his people, "Are you willing to join the revolution of Jesus Christ? Are you willing to practice the violence of love?" For asking that question, Oscar Romero was gunned down, even as he preached. But his question remains. Are you willing to join the revolution of the Christ? Are you willing to make a difference in the world through the violence of love?

I think of Chuck Colson who said that he had to go to prison, to learn what he really wanted in his life. He learned that a person who thirsts for power is like a person drinking salt water: the more you drink, the more you want. It took going to prison for Chuck Colson to learn that what he was really thirsty for Was Living Water that made a violent difference in his soul. This truth became clear to him one day after he had been released and he attended an overseas conference, and a Romanian official came up to him and said that he had read one of Colson's books while *he* was in prison and it had changed his life. Then came two former Soviet leaders, who said that they, too, had come to faith within the last two years. They repeated in their broken English as they hugged him, "I love you. I love you. I love you." That's when Chuck Colson perceived the depth of the violence of love. He had spent the bulk of his life fighting the Cold War. Now he was hugging the men he had once been trained to kill. The violence of God's love had done what missiles could never do, knock down walls and bridge the widest imaginable ideological gulf, bringing lifelong enemies together in love. Colson realized that violent power of the Kingdom of God was what he had really hungered for all along.

Those of you who have been worshipping with us throughout this Holy Week have learned something of the story of Porter Halyburton, a Davidson grad shot down over Vietnam, who spent seven long years as a POW. His wife was even told for a time that he was dead. Porter Halyburton was tortured, starved, beaten and mistreated in every way imaginable. For a time his hatred of his captors became one of the sources of strength that kept him alive. But as the day of his freedom neared, he began to realize that his hatred of his captors was a corrosive acid eating into his own soul. So, on the day he was released, as he walked out of the dreaded Hanoi Hilton as a free man, he said these words, "I forgive you." He said, "I forgive you," to the whole experience. He met the dehumanizing violence of his captors with the amazing violence of love. And that is when he really became free. He told a friend of mine years later that saying those words

was the best and most important decision of his life.

Our God creates movements in the world when people let themselves be changed by the violent love of God,
whether it's Martin Luther surrendering his monasticism to begin a Reformation of the church,
or Millard Fuller surrendering his millions to embark on a life of building Habitat houses for the poor,
or Christ surrendering his life on Good Friday to pave the way
for God's resurrection power to come breaking into the world so as to make all things new.
My friends, we gather as a people of power and purpose!
The world is going to do its violence.
The question is, will we meet and overcome the world's violence with the violence of God's love?

Jesus really means it when he says, if any one is in Christ, he or she is becoming a new creature.
We are meant to be changed. We are meant to be about the process of being made new continuously.
Christians are never called simply to address a particular sin or a particular problem.
We are meant to transform the very structure of society and prepare the way for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.
We are not gathered here to celebrate an Easter event that simply happened years ago.
We are gathered here to celebrate God's resurrection power that breaks into the world here and now
and has the capacity to make a violent difference in the world!
Wild man John came baptizing, which scared people then -- and it scares people now.
As well it should. For baptism symbolizes violent change.
We are buried with Christ in baptism, and we are raised to walk in newness of life,
And this newness is not just for a day, but is meant to be experienced every single day.
Alleluia! Christ the Lord is risen today! Christ is risen, indeed!

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Easter Sunday