

## ***The Narrative of Love vs. Violence***

A sermon by John Strommen on John 18:12-27 March 4, 2018

The news of the aftermath of the Parkland shootings continues to dominate the news. Sprinkled into this coverage is the steady drumbeat of more shootings, arsenals discovered in our neighbors' homes, and so on. Meanwhile, Russia has developed an indefensible nuclear missile, terror attacks continue, Assad bombs his own people and our leaders vow to make the largest military in the world – by far - even bigger. Add to this sexual and physical abuse that's also been in the news of late. And of course there's violence that is not physical but emotional and psychological, wielded through bullying, and intimidation. Often it seems that the exercise of raw power to achieve your ends through intimidation and fear is the bottom line in our world. For many, violence, or the threat of it – whether it be physical or emotional - is the true measure of power, of security, and even truth. Might makes right and revenge is sweet. Many believe this, but for a Christian, it's the difference between following Christ or denying him.

Well, enough of the cheery opening for my sermon. Just a reminder that what goes on in our world today is as old as the hills. Consider our Bible story today and the role of power and violence, a biblical text normally reserved for Holy Week. The story of Peter's denial is a tale of two interrogations, with Peter's threefold denial of Jesus told in two parts and Jesus standing like a beacon of truth in the center. And immediately on either side of these verses is violence and coercion, and its narrative runs right through the middle of this story. But stretching out into eternity beyond the violence in either direction is love. Which narrative do you choose? For one unfortunate chapter in his life, Peter thought that the threat of violence held the key to his life.

Today I am indebted to a biblical scholar in England by the name of Meda Stamper, who provides wonderful insights into this very human story. We see in this story that violence is easier than testimony. While violence bluntly asserts dominance over someone, the nonviolent resistance of love, expressed in Jesus' testimony, is vulnerable and courageous, and trusts a higher power.

Violence begets violence, so when the arresting party of temple guards shows up with weapons to arrest Jesus in the verses immediately prior to these, Peter responds with a sword and cuts off the ear of one of the slaves of the high priest. Peter's violence, utterly contrary to Jesus' commandment to love, is also pointless. Jesus has already come forward to surrender himself. Even when evil seems most in control, it isn't, and Jesus' life will be finished when he says it is. So Jesus, arrested and bound, is taken to Annas, where, in this Gospel, there is no trial. They have already condemned him to death.

Peter and another disciple follow Jesus. That disciple has connections and gets Peter through the gate into the temple courtyard. Interestingly, the words translated as *Gate* and *courtyard* here are the same words used in the good shepherd discourse earlier in John. There, the words get translated as *door/gate* and, instead of *courtyard*, *sheepfold*. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, both enters by the gate and is the gate himself. In our text today, Jesus is in the fold of the high priest, and Jesus the shepherd-gate is laying down his life in order to take it up again. Later that will be clear to Peter, and we as Jesus' sheep might also come to see, that every gate leads to him and every courtyard - every sheepfold - is his. And

even if we close ourselves away behind locked doors from the dangers of the world, Jesus will come to us there, as he did with the disciples after his resurrection. There he will say, "Peace, I leave with you."

As I said, the story of love extends in both directions, way beyond this story's violence.

But at this point in Peter's story, prior to the resurrection, he can see only treachery and danger, the possibility of violence. A slave woman in the courtyard notices Peter and asks whether he is one of Jesus' followers. This question, this opportunity to testify about your identity, was just asked of Jesus two chapters earlier. When Jesus was confronted by the temple guards in the Garden of Gethsemane and asked if he was Jesus, his response was simply, "I am." He must have said it with such authority, courage and conviction that the soldiers, according to John, stepped back and fell to the ground.

So Peter, who has followed into the courtyard that same group of temple guards with their weapons of war, now has a chance to say whose he is with similar boldness. He is given his first chance to testify to Jesus, and to the power and the truth of love, but he stumbles.

"Are you one of them?" asks she. "I am *not*." And Peter chooses a narrative of violence, namely, the threat of violence, as the greatest danger, and he temporarily sells out. And so you have Jesus' testimony, "I am," followed by Peter's non-testimony, "I am *not*."

How would you do in that situation? What *is* your testimony in life?

The scene shifts from Peter's fear and denial to Jesus, bound and under interrogation, but fearless and free. Jesus has nothing more to say because he has spoken boldly to friend and foe all along. This boldness will later be characteristic of Jesus' disciples when they become witnesses to God's love in the world. They, too, become fearless and free and some of them are martyrs. They eventually understood the biggest danger was not violence or death, but something far worse.

Jesus then suggests that his accusers question those who heard what he said, that they call witnesses - in other words, that they behave justly - but they have no truth and justice in them. They have condemned him in advance. All they have left is violence, so a policeman strikes Jesus before sending him to Caiaphas to be condemned.

Meanwhile Peter, still warming himself around the fire among the arresting party, is given a second chance to testify, then a third. He chooses the temporary safety of a lie in part because he has already resorted to violence, which as an act of fear creates more fear in the perpetrator and the victim and everyone associated with them, until love, justice, and truth finally stop the cycle of violence, fear, and deceit.

Peter is right to be afraid if what he fears most is death. John has been imprisoned and, we know from other Gospels, beheaded. Jesus will be crucified. Peter himself, once he follows boldly in love, will be taken where he does not wish to go for a death he would not choose. But in the reality from above, love is greater than this and has already overcome it. Abundant life, which begins now, is not defeated by death. It only bears more fruit.

After his third denial, Peter hears the cock crow, fulfilling Jesus' prediction. You may recall earlier in John where Peter insisted he would follow Jesus no matter what, but Jesus' knew Peter couldn't follow him where he, Jesus, was going. Jesus also knew Peter would deny him.

You may also recall another charcoal fire later in John, where Peter will get another chance to say three times whose he is and to acknowledge that to belong to Jesus means to love. Peter will tend and feed Jesus' flock, and die, for love. He will be the hired hand who does not run away when the wolves come. He will be the boldest of the bold.

So there is hope for the least bold among us, in our comfortable complicity and fearful denial. There is hope for the part in each of us that has failed repeatedly, chosen easy warmth, and heard the cock crow over our failure. Even we can love boldly: tending, feeding, and bearing witness to the relentless, abundant, life-giving love of God for the world.

And what does that mean in our world? What does it mean for you to testify to the God who was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, to the narrative that calls us to place our trust in the God of love and of life that is intended for all people?

There are scripts that we live by in this world, and often they are counter proposals to the God of love. When we place our trust in the wrong things, we are bound to deny Christ, just like Peter. If we go with the flow in this world and follow scripts that are counter to Jesus and the values of Jesus, what does that look like for you? What does it look like when the question gets asked of you, "Are you one of those...who believes that love, hope and forgiveness are more important than raw power and defending your tribe?"

Violence and raw power were the counter proposals to Jesus, and for a few weak moments born out of fear and self-preservation, Peter accepted them as truth. Violence and power are alive and well today, and there are questions we must ask as followers of Christ. In the most well-armed nation the planet has ever seen - both in national defense and in private citizenry - what happens when we put too much trust in such things for our sense of security and life? Human history has generally taught us that when you live by the sword, you die by the sword. If you trust too much in the narrative of raw power, do you become a victim of your own making because you can't manage the power that has been unleashed?

And now, in a culture heavily influenced by guns as a symbol and ideal of freedom and security, we seem to be paradoxically less free and less secure. Ask students. It's astounding how much fear we have in our country, even amidst our affluence and firepower.

Are we as a nation, like Peter, quivering with fear, subtly bowing to the narrative that at the end of the day, raw power and violence is the answer that commands the most respect in our world?

God's horizon of redemptive love and abundant life extends to beyond our horizons, in this life and the next, beyond the reach of fear and raw power. Fear and raw power is fueled by the threat of death. Abundant life and redemptive love knows no foe that can match its promise. Just ask the disciples who saw Jesus rise again, shortly before they spread across the landscape, full of life and courage. Amen.

