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November 17, 2009

Revised September 13, 2010

Healing Violence

We live inside concentric circles.

The individual lives inside families, inside communities, inside towns and cities inside states and nations inside society and culture inside the world. Violence happens at every level of our existence, including the violence we commit against ourselves. However, not all violence is visible. There are unseen forms of violence that allow all the rest. This is the violence of complacency, neglect, disrespect, and meaninglessness.

Violence is a violation. It is a rupture, injury, interruption, rude, crude disturbance. Violence is a desecration. Violence is damage, abuse, intense force that causes pain. Violence is a distortion of meaning. It is disrespect and disregard. Violence is a kind of blindness. Very often when we think of violence, we think of injurious or destructive acts. We think of the violent images that we see every day. Nature's force floods erupts burns blizzards blows rumbles pours through our lives without a care about our stuff or about our lives. There is nothing to be done about this violence except to respect it with wonder. Then there is the violence that humankind perpetrates upon itself.

This violence exists within an ecology of concentric ellipses according to a World Health Organization (WHO) model (12). Individuals within relationships within communities within societies. In all these spaces, seen and unseen violence exists. We can sometimes see suicide, suicide attempts and self-mutilation. We sometimes see relationship violence – domestic violence, child abuse, intimate partner violence. We see community violence when gangs fight and murder. When we see urban, suburban and rural blight, dilapidated schools, lifeless factories, and the dry bones of once thriving businesses, this is evidence of structural violence. The political economy violates a community. All these forms of violence live within a societal environment of cultural norms and shared values and beliefs. All too often our societal environment fosters cultural norms that presume violence. Far too often we make power and violence equal. It becomes axiomatic that we will or sometimes ought to do harm to ourselves or others. We consider this inherent in the human being. It is natural. It is encoded in our DNA.

The WHO says this presumption is incorrect and dangerous. Violence is not inevitable. It is preventable. When we think about violence as a health problem rather than as a legal problem, we may identify risk factors and employ strategies that may stop the violence before it begins. Cultural norms that presuppose violence is a risk factor.

Religious belief is an important aspect of culture. Its sacred pronouncements give meaning to life. It provides holy explanation. It takes difficult concepts and makes them thinkable. It helps us to understand the relationship between time and eternity, act and consequence, immanence and transcendence, the divine and the mundane. It helps us to distinguish between good and evil. Traditional Christian thought understands humanity as fallen from an original state of innocence. The concept of original sin leads to the belief that human beings are born in sin. We will inevitably miss the mark. We are born to moral frailty that is the cause of violent conflict. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus redeem humanity from its fallen condition. The radical love of Jesus is redemptive. Yet, when we focus on the moral frailty of humanity and lose clear sight of the redemptive love of Jesus, or when we believe that the world cannot free itself from violence until Jesus returns, we become complacent.

Complacency allows violence, thus it is complicit in violence. It is itself a kind of violence. It is contentment when we ought not to be content. It is satisfaction with what we know and a certainty that what we know is all we need to know. It is self-righteousness that allows us to judge others and makes us blind to their pain. Complacency can make us deny our own pain because it deceives us into thinking that the realities with which we live exist because they must. They exist because they ought to exist. We become smug and lazy, comforted by a theology that tells us that violence is the nature of humanity. In the fog of our complacency, we fail to recognize our responsibility and the authority that our faith gives us. We have a form of godliness, yet we deny its power. (2 Timothy 3:5)

Complacency leads to neglect. We fail to pay proper attention. Much violence happens because we fail to see and to act. Suicidal behavior often happens when people feel isolated and disconnected. Depression pulls them into hopelessness. This is especially the case with seniors. Sometimes their suicides go unnoticed as suicides because they simply stop taking their medicines. The WHO cites studies that show when seniors have people who stay in touch with them that they are less likely to become suicidal (200).

We not only neglect seniors, we neglect family life. People do not know how to build strong families. Many cultures accept hierarchical relationships – man over woman, parent over child – maintained through violence. This violence becomes generational as people who have experienced violence in their homes as children become either victims or perpetrators of abuse when they come of age and enter into their own intimate relationships. These people are sitting in church pews every Sunday, and the faith community fails to see and to act. Some even tell people who are being abused to endure it as their cross to bear. Such is an ungodly sacrilege. The cure for the violence of neglect is to maintain healthy relationships through love and not through violence. The church ought to teach this. Women and men ought to view themselves as equal partners in child rearing. The church ought to help parents find creative, non-violent ways to discipline children.

However, faith communities cannot and ought not to work on these issues in isolation. When various institutions in society work together on the problem of violence, they create social capital. This is a concept that allows us to assess community integration. According to the WHO report: "It refers roughly speaking to the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust that exist in social relations and institutions" (36). Faith communities can play a central role defining rules, norms, and obligations. They are vital in building relationships of trust and reciprocity among institutions.

Still through the power of holy explanation, faith communities can address the risk factors association with violence, especially child abuse. These factors are stress, isolation, substance abuse, and poverty. Faith communities can give people spiritual exercises that help to reduce stress. They can provide a caring community that stays in touch with people to keep them from feeling isolated. They can provide space for 12 –step support groups to help people overcome substance abuse. They can provide a safety net to help people with basic needs such as food, clothes and shelter. It can let parents know that the phrase "spare the rod and spoil the child" cannot be found in the Bible. The Bible teaches discipline, but that discipline does not necessarily mean violence.

Gross economic inequality is also a major risk factor for violence according to the WHO. When political economies are structured so that most of the wealth goes to a small percent of the population while most people are left in poverty, near poverty or in a precarious middle class existence, faith communities ought to speak with a prophetic voice against this. (In the United State, 20 percent of the population controls 80 per cent of the wealth.) Most faith traditions require charity. They require that most believers give a portion of their income for the benefit of the poorest of a society. The prophetic witness requires more than this. It requires that people of faith demand economic justice from their societies. When we talk about voting our values, those values ought to include economic justice. Poor communities suffer from neglect: unrepaired street, poor police protection, under resourced schools. Violence, substance abuse and crime are more likely to occur in these communities.

Faith communities have a role to play in making sure such communities get the attention and the resources they need. They can provide a base from which people in underserved communities can organize to demand services. Such organizational efforts ought to include gangs who are perpetrators of violence. They can either be part of the problem or part of the solution. Studies in Latin America show that when gang leaders are asked to work with other community leaders to find solutions to the community's problems they are willing to cooperate (45). (While success with such approaches has found limited success, it is an idea that ought not to be abandoned.) Faith communities can also work with schools by providing after school enrichment programs to help students do better in school. Low educational achievement is a risk factor for violence. Faith communities can also provide culture specific education so that students will know their own history and culture no matter the curriculum in the public schools.

Faith communities also have the capability to form urban/suburban partnerships. So often, people neglect each other because they do not see each other. The unity that comes through common belief can allow people to work together toward a common purpose. This purpose ought to be to attend to the needs of the poorest, to those who are marginal in society.

We too often neglect those who are marginal in society. This neglect is a bi-product of disrespect and disregard. We have no respect for the poor. We have no respect for the powerless. We respect the rich and the powerful. We want to know about their lives. We want to know the secrets of their success. We listen to their opinions about this or that whether it is in their area of expertise or not. At least since post-reformation Christianity, when some believers believed in a double predestination, that God had already chosen who would go to heaven and who would go to hell, material success is sometimes seen as evidence of God's favor. Current day prosperity theology is not far from this belief. All too often our theology gives divine sanction to a value system that says material advantage – houses, cars, clothes – means that we are blessed. We search the Bible for a formula that will allow us to get rich.

We think about how God will bless us without equal attention to our responsibility to bless others. Thus, faith communities become complicit in the violence of disrespect and of disregard. Food pantries and missionary work notwithstanding, we ought to ask ourselves if we respect the people we serve. Or, does our first question ask what this person did wrong to end up in this circumstance. We judge. We want to make the reason for their poverty something they did. We want the fault to be theirs so that we may assure ourselves that we will never be in the position of being on the receiving end of charity. We want the fault to belong to them to protect our society, our values, and our political economy from critique.

Further, we are afraid that we will be used and misused by people who want to take unjust advantage of our generosity. We want to be assured that they will not take our money to pay for their necessities while they spend their own money on luxuries. We want to be certain that they do not “Buy what they want and beg for what they need.” We want to be certain that they will not use the help we give to nourish some addiction. So we may help, but our help may also come with suspicion and disdain. One way to show people respect is to remind them of their obligation to be a blessing to others in whatever way they can. We can teach and live a gratitude that pays forward.

Everyone is important in the eyes of God. However, many people do not know this because they have never felt the love of God through a loving human touch or presence. When this touch of love is missing in an individual's life, it is easy to fall into an abyss of meaninglessness. We exist, but at the same time our existence is nothing. It is easy to believe that our lives do not matter, that we have no value, no importance. From this perspective of obscurity, no one matters. No life has value or importance. Therefore it is nothing to take a life, to perpetrate violence, to give one's loyalty only to those from whom one expects to receive loyalty in return—the gang family.

Ethics asks the questions: what is right to do and how do we know? It is predicated upon the notion that there are right and wrong answers. It presumes that right answers and right actions will bring into being a better life, a better future, a better world. Too often for people who perpetrate

violence there is no hope for a better life, future or world. Questions only interrogate the here and now. Questions are questions of simple survival. And a sense of self comes from an conflation of violence and power. This is the starting place of our larger culture that equates violence and power.

Faith communities have an obligation to provide another way to view the world. Power and violence are not equal. There are other ways and means of power. Faith ought to provide a vision of a future world of a better world to live in. I do not refer to a pie in the sky, heaven when we die eschatology. I refer to a realm of radical love that is possible on this earth at this moment. When we work to make this vision a reality in the lives of people, those who come through our doors to worship and those who do not, people of faith will begin to do our part to end violence.

Biblical wisdom teaches: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14) Humility and prayer allow us to set pride aside that often blinds and confines us to our own limitations. However, too often, we do not see beyond our own limited worlds. We cannot see our own wicked ways. We cannot recognize the various ways we are violent in our complacency, neglect, disrespect, and meaninglessness. Listen to our prayers. For whom do we pray? Are we so busy giving a Santa Clause God our wish list for ourselves, our families, for the people we know that we forget to pray for the leaders of our nations, for the poor, for those who are marginal in society, for the victims and for the perpetrators of violence? Have we asked God to show us how to fill life with meaning through our love? Even love for the killers. Have we asked God what God wants us to do for God?

The Bible also teaches us to “Be still and know that I am God.” We often speak of the spiritual discipline of prayer. However in Christianity, we speak less about the discipline of meditation. Sitting still before God is an important spiritual discipline. It is the discipline of listening -- to the world around us, to the breath breathing, to the heart beating, or to a word we say that calms us and that allows the mind to cease its incessant internal chatter. It is a way to listen for the will of God. The personal peace that meditation brings is as contagious as the anxiety and stress that a life without reflection, pause or quiet can bring. Violence comes forth from anxiety, stress, fear and hatred.

Faith allows us to live beyond anxiety. It allows for personal peace. When we calm our minds through meditation and steady our minds we may have peace. Biblical wisdom teaches: “Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us not to worry. We ought to strive first for the kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness and the rest will come. (Matthew 6: 25-34) It is important to understand the Kingdom of Heaven as a state of mind as much as an eschatological and soteriological destination. It is a moral commitment to follow the teachings of Jesus, to submit to the will of God, to live in righteous and just relationships with all of humanity, nature and creation. It is relationship and trust in transcendence, in the Divine Love that is God. Biblical wisdom says:

Do not worry about anything, but in EVERYTHING by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:6-7)

Before conflict erupts into the world, it begins inside each of us. Prayer, meditation, trust, thanksgiving and praise allow us to call a halt to our internal wars before they become the genesis of violent conflict in the world.

Healing violence is an ambiguity. It signifies multiple meanings. It can mean an understanding that violence is a symptom of an underlying condition that must be healed, and the necessary prescription for repairing that condition. It can mean that violence itself heals. In Christianity, Jesus has already suffered the violence that heals. The only violence that is ours to perpetrate now is the violation of violence. We say there is no further use for us to cause each other pain. Jesus lived a radical love. He taught this love and it is this radical, unconditional love that will heal the violence in our land and in our world.

Works Cited

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