

Pentecost XVI
September 8, 2013

There is a story that the Protestant theologian Karl Barth said that a preacher should have a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. At least that's the way the quote has evolved. Barth didn't use those exact words but his intent was such when he spoke to his students in the 1920s and when he spoke to an entirely different audience in the 1960s.¹ That's one approach to preaching that very few seminary students forget.

This particular quote begins an article entitled, "Why Preachers Should Speak About Syria,"² by the Rev. Dr. Wes Magruder, a United Methodist pastor. Magruder says about halfway through his article that "churches which do not explicitly address the Syrian crisis tomorrow, September 8, 2013, are not actually functioning as the body of Christ."

I had similar thoughts last week as I was preparing the sermon on same-sex marriage. Surely, I thought to myself, the killing and now gassing of Syrian citizens is more important than being concerned about the opportunity for equal access to marriage in Hawaii. And now this Methodist pastor challenges all pastors to speak to the difficult issue of the civil war in Syria. He speaks as a prophet calling us back to God.

I don't particularly appreciate his challenge. I wanted to preach on the passages in our readings today. And I believe we have more than enough challenges in our own lives. But I do feel challenged and I do think we can ignore through our passivity what is happening and can happen in our country and in the world through the action or inaction of our government. But I didn't need another challenge. However it's a challenge that needs to be met head on if I call myself a Christian and if we at St Clement's call ourselves a Christian community.

Maybe this is another one of those situations that churches should stay out of. It is, after all, an issue of world politics and we have politicians to take care of that. Churches are here for people of faith who come to be renewed and strengthened, not to get into political arguments or to tell the government how to address a world situation. We can pray for the people of Syria, as Pam McCoy has reminded us regularly in our intercessions. We can pray on our own for the end to civil war in Syria. But when it comes to interfering in matters of world politics, churches need to stick to their own purpose for being – to spread the Good News, to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves; and to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, and visit the prisoners. God didn't say anything about getting involved in someone else's war.

The churches of the world watched from afar as Adolf Hitler gassed millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, Eastern Europeans, and prisoners of war. The churches did not get involved in the pushing back against the death camps. There was one Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, who did get involved. He led an effort to assassinate Hitler, but he was caught and executed a few days before the war ended.

The war in Syria has touched Pope Francis. He has asked that the world pray and fast yesterday in a show of solidarity for the victims of the Syrian Civil war. He seems to be the only Christian leader who has been able to muster the involvement of Christians around the world, if only for 24 hours.

As I think back in my own life, I remember the massive efforts by churches to actively and publicly protest against racial segregation. The Episcopal Church was actively involved. We just commemorated the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, led by that Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr.

And then there were the major protest over the war in Viet Nam, in which many churches participated, which eventually led to Lyndon Johnson not running for re-election. The war didn't end for another 4 or 5 years, but

¹ Princeton Theological Seminary http://ptsem.edu/Library/index.aspx?menu1_id=6907&menu2_id=6904&id=8450

² For the Common Good http://forthecommongood.com/2013/09/why-preachers-should-speak-about-syria-tomorrow/?fb_action_ids=753159287325&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=hovercard

churches and Christians were right there in the midst of the protests. Again the Episcopal Church was actively involved.

I'm not saying I support either of these efforts from the middle of the last century. What I am saying is that those are two situations in which I remember the active involvement of Christians in political situations....involvement that effected change in our government.

I remember the first Gulf War waged by the first George Bush. I was in seminary taking an evening class and one of the professors came into the room to tell us that American troops were on the ground. There was a prayer service happening in the chapel. We in the class heard her and after she left, we had a short prayer, and then we went on with our class as if nothing had happened.

So now we find ourselves faced with the possibility of attacking Syria because someone – depending on who you believe – used poison gas and killed over 1200 women, children, and men. We've seen the horrific pictures of their dead faces and hundreds of bodies lying next to each other waiting for burial. The use of poison gas in war has been illegal in the councils of the world since it was used in World War I. Syria signed on to that agreement just like most other nations. Guns and bombs are not illegal in war --- over 100,000 Syrians have been killed by guns and bombs. But the minute it was determined that poison gas had been used, talk of military intervention suddenly became a reality.

And now we find our own country split on whether we should use military force to punish the Assad government. Not to bomb them out of existence, but to let them know we don't like that they violated the agreement of over 80 years ago. We just want to punish them.

Faithful Christians are taking sides just as the rest of the country is taking sides. The question has been framed as one that gives us two choices: either we use military force or we don't use military force and do nothing. After all, we've already watched 100,000 people be killed; what's another 1200? They're all dead. What difference does it make how they died and why do we suddenly have to do something?

In this morning's passage from Jeremiah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Ruth, Deborah, and Micah, says: "...I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ... Look – I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and doings." This was not something the people of Judah and Jerusalem wanted to hear. But it was the job of prophets like Jeremiah to speak the words of God to the people who were not following the desires of the God who created them.

It seems to me that when we do nothing about evil in the world we ourselves are condoning and colluding with that evil through our non-action. When we let someone else tell us that we have only two options to respond to the killings of 1200 people, let alone 100,000 people, then we are giving up our own authority and power to frame other options for responding.

How many of us have discussed this around the question "Do we intervene or do we not intervene?" Are our discussions of To Bomb or Not To Bomb helpful in addressing the killings in Syria? Is our lack of response the evil that God spoke through the mouth of Jeremiah? Is there another response that involves non-military intervention?

Jesus speaks this morning about giving up all our possessions in order to follow him and his teachings. Is he speaking only of our material possessions? Of course not. He's speaking of our emotional attachments that stand in the way of our following him. He's not asking us to do this blindly; he's asking us to do it with reason and intelligence. But he is asking us to give up our possessions, our attachments, even our lives to follow him and his teachings. ... his teachings of peace and non-violence, of standing up to the Evil One, of standing up to those who oppress and kill others.

.. So what will we do? Will we decide that the civil war in Syria is none of our business, be sorry for the Syrian people and pray for them, and go on with our lives? What will we do as individuals? What will we do as a faith community? What will we do as the church in the world? Is there a place that can be identified between the choices of a military response and no response at all as we have been doing to this point? What can we do to meet the needs – to share the burdens of the people of Syria – even if we can't stop a government and rival groups that are killing its own people?

Personally, I think there are many things that we as Christians and as the church in the world can do. Are those responses even possible? Are we willing to change our lives so that we make the time to come together and determine how we will respond in a non-violent way to effect peace? If we cannot answer those questions and act, then we will sit back and watch the next violent clash in a world already filled with violence.

Let me finish with some text from Wes Magruder's article:

If there is ever a time for the Christian leader to carry a Bible and a newspaper into the pulpit, it is tomorrow morning. I ... suggest that ... in theological terms, the church is supposed to be representative of the presence of Christ in the world. This means that it must proclaim the reality, the shape, and the critique of God's shalom upon the world. When [the church] abdicates this responsibility, then it is no longer "the church." ... The pending strikes on Syria are a big deal. The church has an opinion on this matter, because God has an opinion on the matter. It's always dangerous to claim that one knows for certain God's will in a situation, but I think it is clear what God's will is for this situation.

God's will is "shalom."

It is not a stretch to say then that shalom cannot be ushered in by violence. Jesus said not to resist evil with evil. And Jesus said to love our enemies. I believe that **God's will for this situation is that violence be resisted and overcome by nonviolent means.** But these are things that can only really be said by people of faith, by "the church," by people who take seriously the idea of justice and shalom. ... Otherwise, we might as well remove the word "church" from our name, admit that we have lost our distinctive, prophetic voice, and become Rotary Clubs. Churches [and preachers that] do not explicitly address the Syrian crisis tomorrow, September 8, 2013, are not actually functioning as the body of Christ.

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