

Loving Our Neighbors: Young People, Violence, and Loss
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The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

Violence is anything that diminishes life. The word comes from the same root as *vital*, but violence moves in the opposite direction. It's the antithesis of what Jesus speaks of as abundant life or the Reign of God. Shalom is the ancient vision of a world without violence, where peace prevails because there is justice for all, where everyone lives in right relationship, loving God and neighbor alike.

Violence comes in many forms, beginning with the basic challenges to human survival that are famine and thirst – the inadequate diet that stunts development in mind, body, and spirit. An absence of prenatal care, lack of shelter (a quarter of the homeless population is now children), unpredictable and unsafe environments, the range of child abuse from physical punishment to belittling to slave labor and trafficking, the deportation and incarceration of parents – all these events and circumstances do violence to developing children, and frequently teach violent responses in turn. The hallmarks of human trafficking – fraud, force, or coercion – are present in many other kinds of violence, like abuse in dating relationships, bullying in schools, and even the violent conversation that characterizes so much of our political process at the moment. Added to all of that, the culture around us glorifies violence in film, videogames, sports, music, and language. That culture of violence teaches that violent response is appropriate and somehow “normal” when life brings a challenge.

In contrast, the prophetic vision of abundant life expects streets to be safe for children to play in. Jeremiah offers this lament: “My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’ as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers’ bosom.”¹ He could have been speaking of Tysean Williams.² Yet the prophetic tradition also holds up another vision, of what is possible: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”³

That prophetic vision also expects a diet that is at least predictable and adequate, and occasionally with enough for celebration and feasting; it expects the presence of loving parents and elders, plenty of gardens and orchards and flocks contributing to community abundance, and the strength of a nurturing community to preserve and foster peace. Jesus himself invokes

¹ Lamentations 2:11-12

² A high school student murdered in Rochester yesterday:

<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/2013/11/07/honor-student-shot-killed-at-home-was-not-intended-target/3466819/>

³ Zechariah 8:4-5

privileged access for children, and suggests that becoming a bit more innocent and less calculating is a path toward the Reign of God.⁴ He reserves some of his harshest judgment, including millstones, for those who lead children away from abundance, in life-denying directions.⁵

Growing numbers of children and young people live in contexts and conditions that do not contribute to abundance – in rural poverty, inner cities, third world slums, as child slaves – but also in communities that glorify violence. Consider the social messages around us – that competitive accumulation of manufactured goods or money is the way to a meaningful life – or that destroying opponents, whether on the playing field, in the academy, or the boardroom, is necessary to survival. Note the peer pressure children face at ever younger ages to quite literally “buy in” to the consumerism around them – teaching that you are nobody unless you have the latest fad in clothing or gadgets. Doesn’t it deny any possibility of abundant life to insist that you are nobody unless you fit the socially acceptable norm? These are violent not only because they seek to diminish the life possibility of others. They are even more subtly violent because they teach that uniformity is a sign of the health of creation, and deny the goodness of God’s diverse and varied creation. Consider as well the violence done to nations that endure war for a generation or more, or live with ever more pervasive public “threat indices.” Chinese children growing up with devastating air pollution are one example; the terrorism alerts here are another.

Violence is of particular concern in the lives of the young because they are still growing and developing – at a pace far more rapid than the older and more mature. Anything that interrupts or interferes with that growth has an outsized impact on the future of a child. Many children are profoundly resilient, but that adaptability and survivability is not uniformly distributed, and resilience is far likelier in less violent circumstances. Denying the goodness of an infant for a month or two by failing to answer its cries for help or refusing intimate connection encourages the development of an asocial or antisocial child, and perhaps a sociopathic adult. Violence frequently begets violence. The Christian story is about intervening in that trajectory.

Well-loved and nurtured children have more capacity to choose loving and life-giving responses. Yet human brains don’t reach maturity until around age 25, particularly when faced with crisis or unusual opportunity. That includes opportunities for violence or risk-taking, which is one reason to treat young violent offenders differently from older offenders. It’s also why young people exhibit more risky behavior than their elders – their brains simply aren’t yet capable of a more thoughtful calculus. A group of my peers was recently reflecting on some of the risky adventures of our childhoods – shooting bee bee guns in bedrooms, driving without a license, sneaking out in the middle of the night, ingesting forbidden substances. Most of us have learned something from poor choices. We expect adults to make more rational responses to life’s challenges because experience can help people learn to choose more appropriately. Yet many of the children around us live without the opportunity to learn from experience, without mentors or second chances, without adults who will repeatedly affirm their goodness and

⁴ Matthew 19:14 and parallels: let the little children come to me...

⁵ Matthew 18:6 and parallels: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were put around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

belovedness, without hope-givers when life seems darkest. The suicide rates among young people are lower than their elders, but they make suicide attempts far more frequently.⁶

The wider and wiser community can work both to minimize violence and to inoculate against it. The role of interested adults in the lives of children is counted as one of the most significant predictors of effective and satisfied adulthood. That applies to communities as well – when the adults are interested and involved, the entire community has greater expectations and deeper hope.

The prophetic tradition offers a vision of what is possible, in that dream of a reconciled and restored creation. Religious traditions broadly share an understanding of what a good and joyful and abundant life looks like. We approach that dream by working with partners who share that vision of a healed world. We are committed to building a community of shalom, where the most vulnerable are treated as the most valuable. I believe there are several foundational values we can identify, and commit to seeking together.

1) We hold up that dream of a peace-filled world, with abundant life for all. It means safer cities and communities without threat, and relationships that shun violence as less than human. We teach and model holy and life-giving behaviors that respect the dignity of all human beings, beginning with the spiritual disciplines that help people choose non-violent responses in the midst of crisis. Love your neighbor – at all times and in all circumstances.

2) We are aware of and responsive to the experience of violence around us. Look for the lonely – something like a third of us are profoundly isolated. Ensure access to early childhood educational programs, provide afterschool and summer camp opportunities for children and young people, and help them learn to be leaders. Become people of compassion – offering presence and solidarity in the face of grief, absence, and loss.

3) Advocate for justice in society. Demand decent and effective schools for all children, not simply the few. Make health care available to all, nurture the gifts of every child for life in community. Build frameworks of relationship that expect peace, that seek reconciliation rather than revenge, and work to shift cultures of violence and scarcity into belovedness and abundance. Confront bullies, and question practices, habits, and traditions that perpetuate prejudice or limit possibilities for larger life.

4) Remember the rest of creation as a partner in more abundant life. Start gardens, help kids learn about where food comes from and how to gather and cook healthy meals. Let them feed others. Help young people discover the wonder of the world around us – in bugs and rocks, in stars and starfish. Help them develop the creativity of their minds and bodies through music and math puzzles, dance and painting, tree-climbing and diving – maybe even skydiving!

⁶ Completion rates of about 1 in 25 attempts for youth, vs. 1 in 4 for the elderly. Suicide rate overall about 10.5 per 100,000 for ages 15-24, vs. 15-18 per 100,000 for those over age 25. <http://www.afsp.org/understanding-suicide/facts-and-figures>

Above all, teach and live and model hope for a different, more peace-filled world. Expect non-violent living conditions and social structures, and ensure that help and support are available in time of crisis. Stand in solidarity with those who experience violence – enter in to other lives and situations, rather than fleeing or ignoring the pain. Be part of an alternative vision that insists all children are precious, should live with hope-filled possibility, and have adults involved in their lives to help them discover that hope. Together, we can become the communities we desire and yearn for – with streets that are safe enough to play in, and filled with joyful children.