

Religion, Violence and War – Matthew 5:9, 38-45 - January 17, 2010

(Watch “Religion, Violence and War 1” Clip) As I mentioned last week, that is the suggestion of some of the more hardcore, vocal atheists – if society has a hope for a future that is not filled with violence – it will happen only if human beings wake up and accept that God is a delusion. Basically they believe that much of the violence that happens in our world is a result of religious conflict. Now my desire is not to condemn these atheists because I do believe it is important that we listen to them so we can respond to their challenges.

For example, Sam Harris writes in his book “The End of Faith” that the most potent source of human conflict - past, present and future – is religion and it is going to require waking from the nightmare of religious belief in order to save our planet. So that is the question we want to examine this week. Does violence come from religion? Or as most Christians believe – is religion the antidote to violence in our world?

One of the reasons some people believe like Harris is because they think the bible is a violent text – at least the Hebrew Bible or what we commonly call the Old Testament. Just like last week, I am going to put that discussion on hold for one more week but remind you that next Sunday’s challenging topic is disturbing passages in the bible. So thank you for your patience. The other main reason why some people consider religion to be so violent is, because of history. Unfortunately, all I have to do is mention the word Crusades for you to understand what I mean.

To be completely honest until I prepared this sermon, I really did not know much about the Crusades. I must have missed that class in seminary so I did a little research to catch up. According to most sources these religiously-sanctioned military campaigns

began in 1095 and ended in 1291 and were basically waged by Western Europe – particularly France and the Holy Roman Empire - against the advance of the Muslim Turks who were of course of the Islam faith. The Pope at the time – Pope Urban II – began to preach that God was calling Christians together to fight so they could reclaim the Holy Land and avenge the horrible actions of the Muslims.

His preaching and his rhetoric inflamed and raised the passion of many Christians which evolved into angst and anger and eventually into hate and the desire for war. The weak Roman Empire now had a common foe to fight against instead of fighting against itself. Unfortunately, the people responded – particularly because they were told it was God's will and that they would avoid purgatory if they died in battle. Sounds a little like what we hear happening today among Muslims who are promised they will go to heaven if they die in the midst of Jihad.

But after many lost battles, on July 15, 1099 the Crusaders took over the city of Jerusalem. As one source I read said – they proceeded to massacre the remaining Jewish and Muslim civilians – 40,000 of them - and pillaged or destroyed mosques and the city itself with crosses around their necks all in the name of Christ. Not surprising, July 15, 1099 is a day that would ring through history for the Muslim people much like September 11, 2001 does for us – a day that no doubt will be remembered and talked about for centuries as well - a day that in the name of Allah airplanes crashed into buildings killing 3000 innocent people.

Whether we like it or not, this is a part of religious history that we must acknowledge and learn from. Hopefully in doing so, we realize that this was completely antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and there was no justification for any of it. This

was one example of how religion was twisted and distorted and turned into something it was not meant to be.

For some people the fact that the Crusades happened over 700 years ago helps a little and hopefully Christianity has come a ways since then. However, that does not hold true for everyone – me included - when I remember that the Spanish Inquisition happened less than two hundred years after the Crusades. This time Jews and Muslims were forced to either leave Spain or convert to pre-determined authentic Christian belief – most often through torture again all in the name of Jesus.

This is so grossly out of character from what Jesus did and taught that it is hard to comprehend. And unfortunately, the history does not stop there. The Thirty Years' War in the early 1600's was one of the most destructive conflicts in European history. This primarily religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics – feuding Christians - wiped out somewhere between 15 to 20 percent of the entire population. I don't know about you but remembering this historical background helps me be less judgmental when I watch the news and hear about the Muslim Sunnis and the Shias killing each other today.

I do believe that we have – at least for the most part - moved beyond such barbaric religious violence and war in the Western World but was reminded by Kelly McClure that is not the case everywhere. In October of 2008, Kelly traveled to Uganda with Joyce Meyer Ministries where he saw firsthand the results of violence and war much more recently done in the name of religion. Take a look to see what I mean.

(Watch "Uganda" Clip)

As difficult as the clip is to watch and this tragic history is to face, we must continually go back and study what Jesus said and make sure that what our religious

leaders are saying lines up. The more we understand and believe what Jesus taught the more ready we will be to recognize the counterfeits that are still out there today. Anyone hear what Pat Robertson had to say this past week about Haiti?

On his Christian Broadcasting Network show this past week Rev. Pat Robertson said that the nation of Haiti has been devastated by a large earthquake because its people "made a pact with the devil." Fortunately, people like David Waters, editor of the Washington Post's "On Faith" online column, are speaking out and saying the time has come for Robertson to stop. He goes on to say that, "Considering the massive death, destruction and misery in Haiti, it is shameful for anyone - but especially a so-called minister of the gospel - to suggest that God or the poor people of Haiti had anything to do with it."

I don't think that Robertson was attempting to incite religious violence or war – at least I hope not – but unfortunately it was rhetoric much like this that Adolph Hitler did use to redefine Jesus and convince others that it was God's will to drive out and/or kill millions of Jews. What an absolute distortion of what Jesus said and believed. Yes, our history indicates that there has been violence done in the name of religion and we must never forget this. But I do not believe that proves that doing away with all religion will do away with violence. In other words, I do not accept that religion is the root of most violence as some atheists suggest. Taking away all religion sure didn't seem to make the Soviet Union or Communist China less violent, did it? History actually suggests it became more violent with millions and millions of deaths.

However I do accept that there is something else at the root of violence and unfortunately it is something in the hearts and minds of people – all people – no matter

whether they are Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics or non-believers. We all have this dark side – this propensity toward violence, do we not?

Don't believe me? Then let me ask you what you did the last time someone cut you off on the highway? Did you sit there and say "Wow how nice. Praise the Lord. Wasn't that a great experience?" I suspect that most likely you were invoking the Lord's name in a much different way. What about when someone at the office attempts to get ahead by brown nosing the boss at your expense? How do you feel about that person? Been to a Blues hockey game lately? Not only are we disappointed when they lose but almost as much so when we don't get to see a really good fight. And what about video games? Unfortunately, revenge and retaliation is a part of our psyche and make up and justice still often means an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth.

Now the hope for the world is that we move beyond this notion and instead offer mercy to each other and maybe even care for the people who have wronged us. That our lives are defined by love and not hate which I believe takes religion. It takes accepting what God tells us in the fourth chapter of Genesis, verse eight - that in order to end violence we must remember that we are our brothers' keeper. Changing the kind of violence that continues to exist even today is going to take more than sheer will power. It is going to take a change of heart, a change in behavior and a change in our action against all violence - which I believe is possible through faith in God and a Christian lifestyle.

Does that mean we must oppose all war? Some Christians – mainly pacifists – would say yes. They believe that using war or violence to accomplish anything is wrong. I wish I could call myself such a believer but I not sure that I can. The problem is I am

not sure I can say I believe like many other Christians in what is commonly called a Just War.

Believe it or not, Just War theory was brought to the forefront of history in response to the Crusades. Theologians at the time realized that Christians were waging war for all the wrong reasons and decided to establish criteria determining when it was right to go to war as well as right conduct during war. Mike has put some of the criteria up on the screen. I suppose this makes some sense and yet I still find myself longing for a time when there is no need for war at all.

Unfortunately, the reality of the human condition seems to prevent that from happening any time soon which is why I do turn to God and the Christian faith for my hope for the future. For I believe that God does have a different plan for us even though we have not always accepted it or lived it. And I believe this plan is best laid out for us in the New Testament lesson we heard read earlier this morning.

Two pathways are laid before us. One is the way of the world that leads to violence. The other is a way that leads to something very, very different and offers the possibility of peace. But the challenge is sheer will power alone does not get us there. Again, it requires a change in our hearts which Christians believe only happens when we actually invite God to start working in our lives. When we say, "God I want to follow your path. I want to follow Jesus. Help me" In that process of surrendering – yielding to God's will and God's plan - we believe God's Spirit begins to work in our hearts and we begin to change from the inside out in ways we cannot change ourselves.

As God begins to change us, our values, our ideas, how we look at and even respond to our enemies - all begin to change as well. Over time, little by little, we

become more like what God calls us to be – even more like Jesus. And hopefully the world has hope in that. Hopefully we find hope in that. Fortunately, there are many examples of this happening all around us. I only have time to mention one and hope that you might take some time this next week to think of or find some more. In fact, I hope that some of you will also take the time to ask Kelly McClure about the amazing, loving things that are happening in Uganda today – to the very children who witnessed such violence and were forced to participate in such war.

But let me end by asking you if you remember the Amish community's response to Charles Carl Roberts who murdered five Amish girls and injured four others before killing himself in their school in the hamlet of Nickel Mines in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania on October 2, 2006? They comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting, extended forgiveness to them and attended his funeral five days later. How did they do that? How did they find the strength? Who gave them the idea to do that? For the Amish people it was Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. And this is but one story of salvation, redemption and peace, all – I am happy to say - done in the name of religion. (Watch "Religion, Violence and War 2" Clip) Amen.