

# Plowing Ahead in an Age of Violence

*A sermon on Luke 9:51-62 & Galatians 5:1, 13-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 July 2016*

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## Message

When we fear for our own safety, we condone the violence that promises to protect us, and we use religion to justify it, but Jesus wants to free us to rise above the fear without resorting to hatred and violence.

## Sermon

One of the most frightening things in the news over the last year or so has been the barbaric violence of ISIS. Two weeks ago, a gunman who was probably fuelled more by fear of his own repressed sexuality, invoked the ISIS vision of holy war when he opened fire and killed 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando. These kind of things terrify us. The most convincing arguments in the world about how these people misunderstand their own motives and distort their own religion doesn't make us any less terrified of being around when they snap. And when we are terrified, we desperately want protectors who can out-gun the threat.

Of course, it is not only Islam that has been used to justify extreme violence. Attempts to co-opt Christianity to justify slaughtering our enemies seem to go all the way back to the first disciples. Tonight we heard of two of them asking Jesus whether he wanted them to firebomb a village that had not sided with them. The disciples were probably pretty scared. They were in hostile Samaritan territory. Being rejected would have come as no surprise. Better strike quickly before they strike at us. After all, God is on our side, they figured.

How we respond to the violence of the world around us is very much a faith issue. It is absolutely central to the message of Jesus and to our following of him. For most of us, most of the time, it is not about whether we will personally participate in the violence, but about whether we will hide behind a culture of violence done in our name, or come out from behind it and risk an alternative.

For me, the question has become more personal. I spent most of my life turning the other cheek because I knew that if I hit back, I would only further antagonise my attackers and come off second best. That's not turning the other cheek as a courageous faith choice; that's turning the other cheek because there is no realistic alternative.

But six years ago I got sick of sitting outside my daughter's Tae Kwon-do class, waiting to drive her home, so I joined the class. Now I train two or three nights a week, and if I work hard enough, it is just possible that I might have my blackbelt by the end of the year. Acacia already has one.

Not only does that mean that I feel very differently about my options if I'm in a situation that could turn violent, but I often find myself in a place of ideological conflict in the class. Our instructors regularly tell us that if we're ever under threat in real life, we should act fast and brutally to neutralise the danger in the first few seconds. Nowadays, I might realistically be able to do that. But before I'm a follower of Tae Kwon-do, I'm firstly a follower of someone who was willing to be crucified rather than violate his love for his enemies. I hope I will remember that if, quite literally, push comes to shove.

In all honesty though, the fact that I now have some skills in hand-to-hand self defence doesn't make my fear of chaotic violence much less than anyone else's. When some deeply disturbed person starts shooting up a nightclub with an AR-15 assault rifle, my best jumping back kick is going to be no more effective than standing there screaming.

Tonight we heard the Apostle Paul saying, "For freedom Jesus has set us free." What does it mean to be "set free" when we live in a world that is wracked by violence and gripped by fear? If you listen to some Christians, it sounds like nothing more than a free entry ticket to heaven after you die, but Paul is quite clearly talking about a freedom that has implications on this side of the grave. He talks about how we use our freedom, and he talks quite specifically about hostility and conflict.

Did you notice his contrasting lists of what he called the "works of the flesh" and the "fruits of the spirit"? We mishear the first one all the time, because we are so used to hearing "works of the flesh" as just meaning things like fornication and drunkenness. Those things were on the list, but there is a lot more there than that.

Listen again to the heart of the list: "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy." That's not the sort of family values crap that the wowsers and morality police bang on about. These are precisely the sorts of things that ignite the violent hell that we've turned this world into. The other half of the list – fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, carousing – are the sorts of things we do to numb the pain, and calm our fear, and distract ourselves from the hell-fires we have lit.

So when the Apostle talks about Jesus setting us free from a yoke of slavery, he is talking about a world enslaved by enmity, conflict, jealousy, anger and factions. He is talking about Jesus breaking us free from a system where those things lock us in to patterns where every insult or injury is countered by an obligatory retribution that escalates into another, and another. He is talking about Jesus showing us a way out of the eye-for-an-eye system where vengeance masquerades as justice and simply perpetuates the climate of violence and fear, driving us behind locked gates and crippling us emotionally and spiritually, if not physically.

Most of the time though, we miss what Jesus is saying. We don't have ears to hear, because we have been convincingly sold the lie that the violence that protects us is "good" violence done on the authority of God. If the truth be known, religion probably isn't the cause of violence nearly as much as violence is the cause of religion. We invent religious frameworks and religious laws and religious distinctions between "good" people and "bad" people to justify resorting to violence to keep those we fear at bay. We persuade ourselves that we don't resort to violence because we are scared or hateful, but because God is using us to bring a dangerous world under control. For the likes of Omar Mateen, it sounds a lot more noble to say that you are a holy warrior obeying God's call to purge the world of evil, than to admit that you have projected your own sexually repressed self-hatred onto other people and snapped.

Even after several years with Jesus, the disciples James and John can still imagine that he might endorse their angry urge to firebomb a town that has not welcomed their version of the truth, because they still believe in an angry violent God who hates sinners and unbelievers and probably foreigners, and so they think that surely Jesus is going to bring out the fire and the sword sooner or later.

After all, they had recently witnessed Jesus's transfiguration on the mountaintop, and seen him talking with Elijah. Elijah had slaughtered 450 of his religious rivals, and if our first reading tonight had continued a few more verses, we'd have read the horrifying story of his successor Elisha setting wild bears on group of youngsters whose "sin" was to yell "Piss off, Baldy!" at him. Forty two kids were killed. If he did that today, we'd react like we did to the Orlando massacre, and Elisha would be facing life in prison without parole. In a culture that celebrated the zealous violence of Elijah and Elisha as a godly thing, it is easy to see why James and John could think that a little fire from the sky might be in order for a town of dangerous heretical foreigners who refused to welcome the Lord's messiah.

But Jesus will have none of it. He rebukes their fear-fuelled hostility and their desire to be the agents of divine vengeance. Some ancient copies of Luke's gospel even have Jesus going further and saying, "You don't know what kind of spirit has got into you, for the Son of Man hasn't come to destroy anyone, but to save them." You can still find that line in the King James Version, but most scholars now agree that it wasn't in Luke's original. The ancient scribe who added it may not have been a very accurate copyist, but he got what Jesus was on about a lot better than James and John did.

Tonight we heard the Apostle Paul say that in the emerging culture of God, the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." That's it. One rule is all you need.

Frightened people are suckers for an old-fashioned law-and-order campaign, as we see during every election campaign. We create endless laws to divide everyone and everything into good and bad. Most religions have used strict sets of rules to try to bring the world under control, and whenever we have tried to turn Jesus back into an expression of the old familiar kind of religion, his church too has become known for all the things it wants to outlaw.

But it was Jesus who Paul was quoting when he said that the whole law is summed up in the one commandment to love your neighbour. The lawyers thought they had spotted a way out. "Ah yes, but who is my neighbour?" Lawyers are always looking for loopholes. That's their job. But Jesus demolished the loopholes, saying in essence, "Your neighbours include even the enemies of your nation, race, or religion, so love them all as yourself." He also told us that the thing his followers would be best known for was their love. Not their fierce opposition to sin or their hostility towards immorality. Their love. Love of God, love of neighbour, love of enemies.

So the pathway of salvation that Jesus calls us to follow him on, the pathway to freedom from the death spiral of our anxious hell-bent culture, is not difficult to describe or explain. Paul can sum it up in a single command. Love. A love that is so absolute, that it involves a complete renunciation of the right to retribution, the right to demand an eye for an eye. A love that meets insult and hostility and even violence with courageous mercy and forgiveness.

In our anxiety, we fear that this amounts to passively letting evil go unchallenged and violence have free rein. But Jesus is not at all passive in the face of violence. Passivity does not confront violence at all. Jesus confronts violence powerfully, but with powerful love that is willing to suffer violence but never to escalate it or reciprocate it. That's not going to win any elections any time soon, but it is the way of Jesus, clear and simple.

Clear and simple, but not easy. We heard Jesus tonight expressing his doubts about three wannabe followers, and whether they really had what it took to follow in his footsteps. People keep putting their hand to the plow and then looking back, he says. You can't keep looking back and giving the nod to a bit of the old ways. You think you're ready to follow me in the way of love and mercy, but when push comes to shove you want to pop back and hide behind a bit of old-fashioned lethal force. Every time you look back to the old answers, you pour fuel on the problem instead of plowing a straight furrow towards the solution.

For all the apparent simplicity of Jesus's way, it is not easy. It takes courage, and he is quite uncompromising. So much so that he won't even stop loving his enemies when they torture him to death. And ultimately, in so doing, he completely rips the veneer of respectability off our "authorised" violence and exposes the great lie. Our so-called "good" violence, our official violence, far from being reliably a sword for good in the hand of God, will drive nails through the hands of God. It is so protective of its own power that it will even crucify the perfect embodiment of God's universal love and mercy.

But when Jesus exposes the great lie, its power is broken, and the choice becomes simple in its clarity, if still difficult to fully embrace. So here again tonight, that is the choice that confronts us all. Will we be part of the problem or part of the solution? Will we plow on with Jesus into the new culture of love, or will we keep running back to the old culture where our only sense of safety was secured by armed men in uniforms?

In a few minutes time, Jesus will offer you a piece of broken bread, and invite you to feed on his love and vulnerability, and to become in your own body that same sign of brokenness and love offered for the life of the world. Jesus will be offering himself to you and inviting you to take and eat and become what you receive.

No matter who you are or what you believe or what you have done, no matter how much violence you have committed or condoned or hidden behind, Jesus offers himself into your hands, bearing the wounds himself. But once you reach out your hand and take hold of the way of Jesus, there is no longer any looking back. Plow straight ahead in the love and mercy that is the culture of God.