

What If Jesus Is To Blame?

A sermon on Luke 12:49-56 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 August 2016

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Message

The people who blame Jesus for increasing violence may be right. He has kicked out the foundations of our peace-keeping strategies, and now violent chaos will grow unless we learn the ways of love and mercy.

Sermon

The new atheists are fond of laying the blame for most of the world's violence at the feet of religion, especially Christianity and Islam. The statistics are not actually on their side. In the last century, the death toll of the atheistic revolutions in Russia, China and Cambodia dwarfed the toll from religious conflicts in the same period.

But even if the proportions are not as bad as they claim, an awful lot of horrific violence has been done in the name of God. Most of the time, we want to argue that the people doing these things in the name of Christ or in the name of Muhammed are not genuine followers of their teachings. Certainly the majority of Muslims are saying that in the current crisis, and we've spent a lot of time saying the same thing about "Christian" violence.

But what if Jesus is to blame?

Tonight we heard Jesus say, "I came to bring fire to the earth! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son, mother against daughter, etc."

Jesus seems to be accepting the blame, right there. There is going to be more divisiveness because of me, he says. People will turn on one another because of what I am doing.

Since Jesus is predicting this, and even implying that it is his intention, we can't explain it away as an unforeseen consequence.

So what's going on here? How can the "prince of peace" be the willing cause of division and violence? The usual simple explanation is that he is just observing that people will get very fired up for or against his message, but how could it be that a message of love and mercy and mutual forgiveness would create division, breakdown, bitterness, and violent chaos?

And, not to put too fine a point on it, how can Jesus say here, "I have not come to bring peace but division," when elsewhere he says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"? Does he actually know what he's doing, or doesn't he?

Well, the key may lie in that second quote, because I cut it short there, didn't I? What he really says is, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not the kind of peace the world gives, but my kind of peace." (John 14:27)

Jesus certainly wants peace for the world, but in his quest for a new and better way of creating peace, he is first deliberately kicking out the foundations from under our previous ways of establishing and maintaining peace.

Last week I spoke about how often the medicine we need makes things worse before they get better. This is the same story writ large. The first consequence of Jesus's revelation of the truth about our need for a new kind of peace is that violence and division will increase.

This is not some weird supernatural thing. It is a thoroughly human reality and it can be explained purely in terms of the workings of human culture. *(The clearest explanation of this comes from the literary and cultural theorist, Rene Girard, who just died late last year. Girard was a committed Christian, but his explanation didn't arise from his Christian commitment. In fact, he said that his cultural theory came first and that he became a follower of Jesus when he realised that Jesus had the clearest answer to the problem of human culture. So, although in this sermon I won't keep saying Girard says this and Girard says that, the explanation I am offering here about how and why the message of Jesus does, as Jesus himself said, cause more division and violence, is grounded in the inspired insights of Rene Girard.)*

The world's way of making peace is actually corrupt, evil even. When the world makes peace, it is always at somebody's expense. Division and violence are halted for a time, but somebody unfairly pays the price.

When Jesus describes the division, he uses family breakdown as his example. We often think of families as the most important place of unity, so the idea that Jesus is going to cause family breakdown is shocking. But many families illustrate how we create peace at somebody's expense.

Get any family therapist talking, and they can give you a hundred stories of families who present as all united, but having a problem with one member. And they will tell you that when you shine a light into the family system, the family's supposed unity turns out to be dependent on their shared angst towards the one problem member. Their shared identity is found in defining themselves as different to the bad apple. Usually the bad apple now also believes themselves to be the problem. But in truth, they are more the victim. All the tensions in the rest of the family are being diverted on to this one. We unify "us" by identifying a "them" as the problem.

What happens if the therapist manages to get the rest of the family to see that they are actually scapegoating this one? Well, if they genuinely recognise what they are doing, they can't do it any more. It won't work if you know that it is an injustice. And when the tensions in the rest of the family no longer have their customary outlet, they erupt. Suddenly, they are all at each other's throats. The revelation of the innocence of the victim destroys the system by which we had maintained peace.

Family therapists and relationship counsellors could also tell you plenty of stories about couples who arrived with their relationship in tatters and who achieve a miraculous outbreak of fierce unity when they turn on the therapist, or turn on someone else. Nothing unifies us as quickly as finding a common enemy. But if the common enemy is taken away, or you suddenly recognise that you are unfairly projecting your angst onto them, the spell is broken and the original animosity comes raging back to the surface.

The same system operates on the global stage too. When a whole nation is at risk of turning on itself and exploding into violent chaos, it will unite itself against some conjured enemy. We unify "us" by identifying a "them" as the problem. Rising unemployment is blamed on

asylum seekers taking our jobs. Rising divorce rates are blamed on the “threat” of same-sex marriage. Out of control drug problems and gun-violence are blamed on Mexicans, so a wall must be built.

Now the reason that most of those examples seem a bit obvious and stupid to us, is that the truth has been made visible, and Jesus was a key figure in the exposé. Before he bugged up the system, we used to be able to create and maintain peace, even at a national level, with relatively few victims, and we kept them almost completely hidden behind our absolute belief in their guilt.

If you are doubting whether the reality I’m describing was recognised by Jesus and the gospel writers, just remember the words of Caiaphas reported by the Apostle John: “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” (John 11:50) He knew exactly what he was doing when he decided to unify his people by scapegoating Jesus, but in order for it to work, the people couldn’t know. They had to believe that Jesus was a dangerous blasphemer and that they were absolutely right to be chanting “Crucify him. Crucify him.”

Even the word scapegoat comes from the ancient Hebrew sacrificial practice of transferring all the sin and anger and violence of the nation onto an actual goat and ritually expelling it from the community to die in the wilderness. Believe it or not, that system used to work. The goat would be driven out, and there would be peace for a while.

Why doesn’t it work anymore? It doesn’t work anymore because we no longer believe in it. We no longer believe that our sin, our hatred and violence, are a thing that can be purged from our souls and from our community by transferring it onto a dumb animal and killing it there. We know that is not true, so even if we tried the ritual, it wouldn’t work. You can’t delude yourself if you are aware that you are trying to delude yourself.

And that, my friends, is what Jesus has done. He’s made us aware. We were all very unified when we were chanting “Crucify him, Crucify him,” but it all fell apart when we saw what we had done. More than any other victim in the history of the world, it was impossible to keep believing that Jesus was a guilty party and that we could purge the evil from our midst by killing him. And by becoming the most transparently innocent victim of all time, Jesus unmasked the truth of how we construct our peace. He opened our eyes to the victims we create, to the injustice we perpetrate, to the hidden cost of the ‘peace’ we enjoy.

The truth had begun leaking out before Jesus – the Hebrew prophets had already begun calling our attention to our victimising behaviour. Even when the revelation reached its peak in Jesus, it didn’t instantly end the system. But it certainly ignited a fire that continues to grow in our day. No previous generation has been so acutely conscious of its victims.

Things like racism, homophobic hate crimes, domestic violence, and the abuse of children have been going on forever, but we now see them for what they are because we identify with the victims. In the past we hid the truth from ourselves under mythologies that said that some races were not made in the image of God, that some people were abominations, that women were created to be subservient to men, and that God had commanded the violent punishment of rebellious children.

But when we can no longer believe our justifying myths, we have a bigger problem before we have a solution. Our generation has made significant progress in dismantling the injustice of sexism, but has it produced more domestic peace? No it hasn't. Our wives and daughters were the hidden victims of the old patriarchy, but as long as everybody believed the myth and accepted their place, there was a kind of peace. An unjust peace, but a relatively stable one. But as the mythology has been unmasked, and we have started to treat one another more as equals, that stability has broken down. Now we talk about a war of the sexes.

"I came to bring fire to the earth! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on households will be divided."

By unmasking the truth, Jesus has completely buggered the system. By opening our eyes to our victims, to our own injustice, he has flushed the hidden violence of our culture out into the open. And now we are caught. We can't unsee what we have seen. We can't re-deceive ourselves. The game is up. Society's internal violence can no longer be controlled by expending it all on a few victims while conning ourselves that we are thus cleansed and unified and made pleasing to God. So if the violence can no longer be managed in the old way, we are going to need a new way, or else it is going to escalate out of control and we are going to destroy one another.

Now I could stop at this point, because that is where tonight's gospel reading stopped. Jesus simply predicted the escalation of violence, and then told us that we need to be able to interpret the signs of the times. Which is what I hope I've been helping us do for the last fifteen minutes. But that's not all Jesus ever had to say on the subject.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not the kind of peace the world gives, but my kind of peace."

Jesus does offer us peace. He does offer us a way of salvation from the hell we have ignited around ourselves. But he is honest enough to recognise that we will be so reluctant to accept his way that an escalation of violence would be inevitable. Because Jesus's way of peace requires nothing less than a conversion, nothing less than a total transformation of our own hearts and of the foundations of our culture. The paradox of those new atheists is that they are partly right in blaming Jesus for the escalating violence, but they think they have grown too sophisticated to trust the God-shaped pathway out of it.

Jesus's way of peace involves the absolute renunciation of retaliation and retribution, and the total embracing of a culture of all-inclusive, boundary-less love and mercy and forgiveness. Jesus's way of peace involves loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, and doing good to those who persecute us. Jesus's way of peace involves taking up our own crosses and being crucified if necessary rather than resorting to retaliatory violence.

Jesus certainly doesn't promise that if you embrace his way of peace, there will immediately be peace and there will be no more victims. Rather, he promises that you will be transferred from the side of the perpetrators to the side of the victims, and that as a victim, you will be united with him as he lays down his life – as we lay down our lives – for the healing of the nations and the salvation of the world.

Obviously, this is still far from a popular option. No politician is ever going to be elected by proposing that we all stop retaliating when enemies attack us and instead offer ourselves into their hands. Jesus has always had a lot more fans than followers. When we were forced to choose, we voted for Jesus's execution, not for the adoption of his agenda.

But to our astonishment, Jesus didn't retaliate and withdraw our chance to change our minds. Our victim came back from the dead, not to get even, but to continue calling us to embrace the new way and to model it for us in his absolute freedom from resentment and his overwhelming forgiveness. And he is here among us again tonight, the risen victim, still gathering us into a new unity that is for the world and not turned against anyone. He is here tonight, welcoming us to his table, feeding us for the journey, and calling us to follow him in pouring out our lives for a victimless peace, a peace that will last.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not the kind of peace the world gives, but my kind of peace." It's your choice.