

## What Saves You?

### **1 Peter 1:13-21**

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

(Read Dr. Seuss' *The Butter Battle Book* before the sermon. Perhaps as a children's time)

Okay, now that you've had some time to think about *The Butter Battle Book*, I have a question for you. Is violence a good thing or a bad thing? It's kind of a tricky question. Because our first response is to say that violence is bad, and it's always bad. But when we think about the world we live in, sometimes we feel like violence can be justified if it used carefully and in order to protect innocent people.

That's what we see lived out in Dr. Seuss' book. At first, the Yooks aren't even using violence. They have a non-violent wall, and a person patrolling that wall with a weapon. They haven't hurt anyone. But one of the Zooks on the other side feels threatened by the weapon. Rather than hurting a person, he neutralizes the weapon. To him, this should alleviate the tension. But instead, it raises the tension, because the Yooks see that as an act of aggression. And they escalate their response.

That's the theme of this story, right? Everyone keeps escalating their response. I'm sure if you asked these people, they would all say they are against violence, except when it keeps them safe. They keep resorting to violent measures to find that safety, but the paradox is that the escalating response actually endangers them more. This concept is what modern theologian Walter Wink calls 'the myth of redemptive violence.'

The redemptive violence myth, he says, is the belief that violence is a necessary and appropriate response. We see this in our culture in lots of places. It's the plot of at least half the movies coming out of Hollywood. It's in stories, comic books, fairy tales... There's a good guy and a bad guy. They're locked in an epic struggle, with neither one ever really winning. Over time, it becomes apparent that if one is going to be the true winner, they are going to have to completely destroy the other. No premium is put on reasoning, persuasion, negotiation or diplomacy. There can be no compromise with an absolute evil. It must be totally annihilated or totally converted.

Wink writes, "The belief that violence 'saves' is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable."

We saw redemptive violence take center stage this week, with the news that Osama Bin Laden had been killed. It's actually a pretty good example. There are two very powerful players in the story. The good guy? Americans, or perhaps the American government or military. The bad guy? Bin Laden. Both are very powerful, with the bad guy constantly taunting the good guy, yet the good guy never completely defeating the bad guy. It seems like the good guy won't ever win, but he turns to violence one more time as his saving hope. And lo and behold, the good guy does win. Or at least that's how it appears today.

But we are talking about a powerful foe, and there are certainly consequences for bringing him down. US embassies and military bases around the world heightened security. Because somewhere, the number two man in Al-Qaeda just became the new leader. And he's got new incentive to want to attack America. The truth is, violence can never truly save us. Even if it looks like it does at first. In the hours following the news of Bin Laden's death, Facebook and

Twitter both went viral with a quote by Martin Luther King. At some point, the quote became mangled, but King's words from his sermon *Strength to Love* are still appropriate. He said:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness...in a descending spiral of destruction...The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

Sometimes, what is annihilated with ongoing violence is not our bodies or our countries, but our values. There is a bumper sticker that reads “we must kill the people who kill people, so that people will know that killing people is wrong.” I'm pretty close to being a pacifist, but even I can admit that there are times when in our imperfect world, violence is the best option available. But when we violate our own values, even temporarily and for good purposes, that is not a reason to celebrate. I was truly disturbed this week to see people cheering about Bin Laden's death the same way they would cheer at a soccer match. I agree that his death is a victory for our country and a move toward justice. But excessive celebration denies the fact that we did have to violate our values to accomplish that.

Writer and Rabbi Michael Lerner explains this from a Jewish perspective:

When we do the Seder on Passover and recite the plagues that were used against the Egyptians to get them to free the Jews, we put our finger in the cup of wine, symbolic of our joy, and dip out a drop of wine for each plague — this symbolizes that our cup of joy cannot be full if our own liberation requires the death of those who were part of the oppressor society.

Passover may be a Jewish tradition, but Jesus was Jewish. And in his teachings, we recognize that same lesson still applies for us as Christians. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Bless those who curse you. Jesus never said we shouldn't seek justice. But he did encourage us to stick to our principles and values while doing so. He encouraged us to

remember that even our enemies were created by God. Despite what our culture tries to tell us, violence is not redemptive. It may provide temporary respite, but it cannot save us.

So what can save us? Just as we turn to violence, we turn to all sorts of things that provide only temporary relief. We turn to money, to drugs or alcohol, to sex, to work, to family... you name it. But our Scripture reading this morning says, “set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you.” It is the grace of Jesus Christ that saves us.

Now those of you who have been in my confirmation class can stand up and define mercy and grace for the rest of us, right? Well, in case any of you need a refresher, mercy is when we have done something wrong and deserve punishment, but it is overlooked. We think of people shouting out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me!” Mercy is forgiveness. Grace, on the other hand, is being rewarded when we haven’t done anything special. It is God’s grace that extends to us the gift of salvation, the gift of the life that truly is life. The gift of freedom in this life, and the ongoing gift of eternal life.

And while this gift of grace is free for us to receive, it was not free for God to give. Grace is a costly gift. In fact, it is the most costly gift. Jesus said the greatest thing anyone could do for someone else was to sacrifice their life. Which, of course, is exactly what Jesus did. We are saved by grace through God’s amazing love for us. In a moment, when we approach the Lord’s Table to share in communion, we will read the words, “Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God’s love for us.”

I invite you to reflect on the grace God has lavishly poured out into your life. You have done nothing to earn God’s love, and yet there it is. There it is so abundantly that it has the power to save you in this life and the next. It is God’s grace, and only God’s grace, that can truly save us. Amen and amen.