

Created for violence or created for peace?

Isaiah 2:2-4

² In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many people's shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴ God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many people's; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor – but hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. This will prove that you are children of God. For God makes the sun rise on bad and good alike; God's rain falls on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don't tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don't Gentiles do as much? Therefore be perfect, as our heavenly Lord is perfect.

Let's pray together: *God of peace, God of all nations, we come before you now...*

At the Battle of Gettysburg, that bloodiest battle of the American Civil War in which around 8,000 soldiers died and another 27,000 wounded – from that battle around 30,000 rifles were recovered from the battle field. Of the weapons that were salvaged, an incredible 24,000 rifles were still loaded (that's either around 70% of the rifles that had not been fired). Of that total number, half had been loaded more than once (12,000 loaded more than once), and a quarter had been reloaded multiple times. Apparently, *one poor soldier had reloaded his weapon twenty-three times*, but the weird thing is that he never fired a single shot.

What does this mean? With the technology of the time, it is possible that some of the weapons didn't fire correctly. Another possibility for some is that they were struck down before having a chance to fire. But one theory, proposed by Dave Grossman in his book *On Killing*, concludes it is because the soldiers simply didn't want to fire – that they couldn't – even with their own lives under attack. Though they would not want it to be known that they were not firing, so they continued to aim and make it look like they were shooting – this would not have been hard on a field of chaos, surrounded by smoke of canon fire and other muskets going off in the line. So, they just kept loading and reloading, up to 23 times, til they were struck down.

The work of army historian S.L.A. Marshall would confirm Grossman's theory that the majority of those Civil War muskets were not fired because of the soldiers could not shoot. Marshall did

extensive studies of World War II veterans which he published in his book, *Men Against Fire*, where he claimed that 75% never fired at the enemy for the purpose of killing, even though they were engaged in combat and under direct threat. 3 out of 4 reported that they did not fire for the purpose of killing – that they would intentionally aim high to shoot over their heads, or into the ground.

Marshall's work is seen as controversial, with some believing his conclusive numbers were too high. But one group that did believe the truth of his conclusions was the US Army, so much so that it caused them to change their training methods in ways that would get a much higher firing rate – to try and desensitize combat soldiers so that they would be more willing to kill.

- The Army switched from bull-eyes for target practice to human silhouettes.

- They started adding rapid fire training, both at long and short distance – helping create an almost automatic firing response from soldier.

- There was also a switch to developing camaraderie in training. The idea you're your actions will harm or help the whole group – they were not fighting for themselves at the time but more concerned for the people to their left and right. This also worked to disperse responsibility for the killing throughout the group.

These changes were largely based on Marshall's studies – trying to override a human impulse to not kill another human. These changes were, and continue to be, highly successful, soldiers' firing rates during the Vietnam War were over 90 percent. From perhaps 25% of combat soldiers firing to almost 90% - not because it is their human nature, but because of a process of resocialization and training.

I do not bring up these stories and numbers to harp on the US Army – as a historic peace church our calling is much deeper and more difficult than – but because what I find in these numbers is actually a bit of hope – that in the deepest and truest parts of who we are, we were not built to kill one another. Sometimes we say that violence is just part of our nature as humans, these numbers, I believe say otherwise. That when Union and Confederate soldiers looked at each other across the field of battle, the majority of them could not bring themselves to fire. And not just because they were Americans – for when American soldiers looked across the trenches and fields and saw Germans and Japanese – the majority could not fire. This instinct to not shoot a fellow human had to be socialized out of them by the army. Out of us. Most of us did not emerge with the capacity to kill, it has to be trained and socialized into us. Deep within us seems to be a recognition of shared humanity, even with our enemy – even when, as these numbers would show, our enemy is threatening our very life.

It is not just soldiers though. Father Greg Boyle (founder of *Homeboy Industries* who I have mentioned before) has spent more than 30 years working with gang members in Los Angeles. He has buried over 200 gang members in his life and work in L.A.; he says that in his early days as a priest, he would be officiating the funeral of a 16 year old – and he would go up to one of the of the close friends and fellow gang members of the deceased, also a teenage. And he says, “I would almost always say something like, ‘I never want to see you lying in a coffin at sixteen.’ At first, I expected the homies would say, ‘That makes two of us G, I don’t want to die either.’ But,

almost always – almost always, they would say something like, ‘Why not – you gotta die sometime.’”¹

Father Greg calls this *a lethal absence of hope*. It is not a violent nature that causes most gang members to resort to violence but an utter lack of hope – and a failure to recognize the sacredness of one’s own life.²

This is not what we were created for. It is not our nature – not the truest sense of our nature. It comes from a lack of hope. A failure to recognize the sacred in our own self, thus we can never see the sacredness of the other.

The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature. The Hebrew word for this vision is ‘shalom’, a sense of well-being, a sense of all being in right relationship together.³ This, says our holy book, is how things were created - for all to be in right relationship. This, we say is who we are in our truest sense, one with each other.

One way this is expressed in the community of faith in Israel, is the affirmation that Abraham and Sarah are the parents of all Israel and every person is their child. (You might remember singing the old children’s song, ‘Father Abraham had many sons...I am one of them and so are

¹ From Father Greg Boyle’s book *Tattoos on the Heart*.

² He adds that almost every homie he has worked with has a ‘father-shaped’ whole in their lives they are trying to fill.

³ Walter Brueggemann in *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*.

you.” I sang this as a kid but never understood what in the world this meant. What that song is trying to express is the idea that we are all children of a singular family – this is God’s intent). In the New Testament, the church has a parallel vision, only instead of all being from the same family tree, the image is of all persons being drawn under the lordship and fellowship of Jesus Christ and therefore we are a singular community.

Shalom is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. The origin and the destiny of God’s people is to be on the road of shalom – the road of being in right relationship with ourselves, with God, with one another – even with our enemy. This vision of wholeness, we say is the **Ultimate will of the biblical God.**

This is the vision of creation – this is what the creation stories are trying to communicate and affirm about God and us. That God intended everything to be in harmony together; that God’s Ultimate Will for us is balance and purpose for each person and being – a place for each person and living being. All in Order. The Creation stories affirm that the world is not chaos – that we were not thrown into chaos, but we were given order – that God’s intent is order. Peace. Shalom.

It is only a distortion of this that brings violence and exploitation.

This is what Christians have called ‘the Fall’ or ‘sin’. ‘Sin’ some have said is a break in the system, a flaw in the system which keeps producing the same results of injustice, hatred, exploitation and pain.⁴ This is how our Biblical story is narrated. It begins in shalom. It begins in

⁴ This definition of sin came from a talk by Nadia Bolz-Weber at the 2018 Idaho Discipleship Conference.

harmony. Then come the ways in which we distort God's vision – where we fail to see this abiding vision of *shalom*.

There are three brief things about *Shalom* that I want to leave us with, all that come from Walter Brueggemann in his book *Living Toward a Vision*.

1. Shalom is never short-range.

Isaiah preserves a story of King Hezekiah who bargained the future of his people for present accommodation. Rebuilding, seeing the long-range of peace, caring for creation – these are not five-year plans or even the work of one-generation. Shalom can not be found in looking only at the current numbers or next fiscal quarter, it cannot be found in the next election cycle or by checking poll numbers. It is a vision of the long-view – the work we do now that might benefit the third and fifth and tenth generation.

2. Perhaps the most difficult one for me, for us. *Shalom* in a special way is the task and burden of the well-off and powerful. They are the ones held accountable for shalom.

The prophets persistently criticized and attacked those who were well-off and powerful – those who most benefited from and prospered under the systems of injustice and exploitation. Thus, as a people of means living in a country of wealth, the work of *shalom* is ours to attend to.

That is a hard word for us. And hopefully an encouraging word. That we are continually called to the work of seeking right relationship

3. Finally, *Shalom* is a **lasting vision of hope, most often articulated when the people are feeling hopeless and searching for faith.** When the people were most uncertain of their faith, of where God was, of how things could ever be different – this is when the prophets most often articulated a vision of God’s *shalom*.

This vision from Isaiah 2, of swords being beaten into plowshares, comes at a time of continual military attacks – just before they ultimately are defeated and marched into exile.

And when the people are being sent to Exile, the prophet Jeremish says, “seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom. A letter written to displaced persons in hated Babylon, where they have gone against their will – here the vision is remembered, recast and renewed. The people are told, “your shalom will be found in Babylon’s shalom.” Your peace will be found in the peace of your enemy. Your harmony will be found in harmony with your enemy.

Our shalom is intertwined. Intertwined with democrats and republicans and libertarians; evangelicals, mormons, those of no faith, and Mennonites – ours is all intertwined. Mexicans, Hondurans, Canadians and Americans – ours is all intertwined. Iranians, N. Koreans, Syrians – our peace is found together. Our peace will only be found in the peace of the other.

Let us be people of such an abiding vision.

A people who look across the battle field and see within our enemy the divine light of God.

This is where it begins.

May the peace of God dwell in our hearts now and forever. Amen.