



**HOLLYWOOD**  
**United Methodist Church**  
the **heart** of hollywood

**TOUGH QUESTIONS:  
GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE. PEOPLE KILL PEOPLE.**  
Sunday, April 20, 2008

**Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor**

**Scripture: Acts 7:55-60**

A few years ago we cleaned out my mom's house in preparation for its sale, as she had entered a skilled nursing facility. One of the last places we tackled was her bedroom closet, as my mother LOVED clothes, and so we dreaded going in there. When we finally had emptied it all out, I found a long cylindrical stick of some sort, wrapped in a blanket, tucked way in the back. Imagine my surprise when I unwrapped it and found an antique shotgun!

Now, my mom, bless her heart, was a very nervous and fearful person. She kept every door locked, all the time; she kept a baseball bat by the front door, and constantly thought someone was going to break in. I couldn't figure out why she would keep a gun in the first place (as having one would have made her more nervous). So I asked her.

"Well, Kathryn, that was your grandfather Cooper's shotgun. He used it to shoot coyotes and wolves who would get onto his turkey farm back in Tennessee. I kept it because it belongs to you, and besides: it made me feel safe."

I said: "Mother. Now you know that even if someone had ever gotten through your fortress of a house you wouldn't have been able to get through all of your clothes to get to the gun."

She laughed and said, "Yeah, I know. It's silly. But after a while I kept it hidden because I knew you would have a fit if you knew there was a gun in the house so I never told you."

I took it home with me and never told my boys about it. Not that they would have a fit; quite the contrary, they would be all over it. It's locked out in a shed at the end of our backyard. And while I have considered mounting it and hanging it somewhere in the house, as a family heirloom; I haven't gotten to that point, yet. At the most basic level, no matter its sentimental value: It's a gun, which for me emblemizes death and destruction, and is the opposite of my faith in God, in life and peace.

Today, on the ninth anniversary of the Columbine shooting, and just a few days after the first anniversary of the Virginia Tech shootings, our sermon series focuses on the violence that we as humans inflict on each other – sometimes personal, sometimes as agents of the state, and how we as Christians are called to work for justice and life and peace in this world which too often glorifies guns and death and destruction.

Scott Bader-Saye wrote in the Christian Century a few years ago:

*In the wake of September 11 there was an increase both in church attendance and in gun purchases -- an odd juxtaposition of behaviors. We seem to believe in a God who will preserve our future beyond the grave, but we worry that God may not be all we need on this side. We find it hard to affirm with the psalmist, "My times are in your hand," when the times are so dark and frightening. And so we feel tempted, compelled, to take matters into our own hands. We find it hard to trust that God will deliver us from "enemies and persecutors," and so we seek through force to assure the destruction of the enemy.<sup>1</sup>*

Stephen [whom we read about in today's passage] shows that the "impossible ethic" of enemy love is indeed possible, though costly.

Today we read from the Acts of the Apostles, the first book in the New Testament following the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The book of Acts was written by Luke, so we know that it was written for a primarily Gentile audience.

Jesus had ascended to heaven, and the disciples were following the spirit, carrying forth his ministry of teaching and healing and establishing the church. Well, 11 apostles didn't have enough time in the day to do all that needed to be done. So, seven deacons were appointed to carry out social service and administrative functions, to free up the apostles for other service. Stephen was one of these seven deacons.

We don't know much about Stephen except for Luke's description that he was a man "full of grace and power" and that he did "great wonders and signs among the people." And we know the incident that leads up to today's lesson: how the religious leaders challenged his preaching, had him arrested and placed before the Sanhedrin, or council of religious leaders, where he preached passionately and eloquently – and told them that they didn't believe in the power of Christ because they were stuck in their ways. He called them 'stiff-necked people.' That didn't sit too well; they became enraged, and dragged him out of the city and because they felt threatened by his ministry and his message, because they were afraid that he was a challenge to their authority, they punished him according to the appropriate law for a blasphemer: they stoned him to death.

Now, it's easy for us to understand how their actions, while lawful, were certainly not just. And definitely not in accordance with Jesus' teaching and preaching and definition of God's justice.

It's harder for us to see when our actions, or the actions of those we place in authority, cause injustice instead of justice. Here is a video of how we as society today can feel threatened by the radical message of Christ.

*.....Though we are tempted to hide behind barricades, guns and bombs, the stories of martyrs [like Stephen] remind us of the one who overcame evil not by defeating the enemy but by loving the enemy and thus defeating death itself.<sup>2</sup>*

We cannot place our trust in our own efforts, in guns and armaments; in war and violence and torture. To do so is ultimately self-defeating. None of those things will give us peace. Moreover, if we truly believe in Christ's call to build the beloved community, and have God as our true security – we will not only oppose efforts to expand war against other nations; we will stand against any state-sponsored act of aggression: from capital punishment to the torture of prisoners to the enabling of easy access to guns under the guise of the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment – especially those that are easily available to kids. (Why is it easier for an 18 year old to get a handgun than a driver's license in some states?) God does not want us to trust in our own power, but the power of the almighty. Jesus did not say if you feel threatened, take up arms and defeat your enemy; he said if someone strikes you on one cheek, turn your head and offer them the other. Jesus didn't say that the right to bear arms was more important than the commandment to love others; he said that loving God and loving our neighbors was the most important thing we could EVER do.

Jim Wallis has written in his new book, *The Great Awakening*: justice does require punishment, but what message does state killing to punish killing finally send? Thinking of our current involvement in Iraq: Sadaam Hussein was a violent and remorseless man. But by taking his life we sink to his level. If we truly believe that all human life is created in God's image, then no matter how distorted that life may become, we do not have the right to take it. We simply should not kill to show we are against killing. That is indeed to prefer revenge over justice.<sup>3</sup>

And we must prefer justice over all. To me, the most striking image in the video presentation we saw a moment ago was the small child, dying in a field with a bird of prey just waiting. Look how much money we are investing in our own weapons of mass destruction – guns and armor and ammunition – to protect our own interests in Iraq. At what cost? At the cost of our current economy, of our children's future, and of our very souls. The Nickelback song which Stephen and George sang so beautifully: "Imagine what the world could be if everyone cared, if everyone shared and swallowed their pride – we would see a day where nobody died."

Reinhold Neibuhr once said that "the worst evils in the world are not done by evil people, but by good people who do not know they are not doing good."

That's a powerful indictment of me, and of you. I thought about it yesterday, as I drove home from the cleaners. I rounded the corner at the main intersection of my little community around 5 pm, where every Saturday for the past 5 years a gathering of

people have held up signs and protests against the Iraq war. Usually there are 10-20 people out there stirring up car horns and enthusiasm. Yesterday there were two. And I wondered – is it a bad day, or do they consider it futile? At some level, have they – and we -- given up working for peace? Or have we traded in public outrage for electronic communication that better fits our lifestyles?

I don't know the answer. What I do know is that the NRA is right. Guns don't kill people; people kill people. Just as the Sanhedrin had Stephen stoned for his blasphemy about the living Christ, so too will we pay the consequences for remaining silent about peace with justice in our world. Peace is not simply the absence of war; it is the pursuit of justice. And if it is to happen in our lifetime, it is up to us. The Holy Spirit is ready to lead; we must be ready to act.

In closing – a Cherokee legend: A grandpa tells his grandson, "My son there is a battle within people, between two wolves which live inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, benevolence, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thinks for a minute and then asks "Grandpa, which wolf wins?" The old grandpa replies: "The one you feed."

We can choose to live in fear and place our trust in the arms that we bear, or that we hide away in our closets "just in case"; or, we can trust in God who can bring forth resurrection and new life for the future in ways we can't begin to imagine today. It's up to us.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Bader-Saye, "Sticks and Stones," *The Christian Century*, April 17, 2002, found online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2243>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, New York: HarperCollins, p. 212.