

## Sermon on the Decade to Overcome Violence

**Community Prayer/Opening Prayer: Dear God: You have said through your Son that every tree is known by the fruit it bears. You are the True Vine, and with your help, we will bear much fruit. Help us to hear our call and to have the strength to respond. We ask this through your Son. Amen.**

**From 1 John 4:7-21**

**“Beloved, Let us love one another, because Love is from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear . . . The commandment we have from Him is this: Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”**

It sends chills down my spine to recite this particular passage. Isn't it beautiful? For me, this passage is one of those which marks a cornerstone; one that, of the many messages of the gospels, points to at least one of their main themes.

Like the gospels themselves, it is difficult to pin down the “exact” message of the Decade to Overcome Violence. During my year in New York City working for the World Council of Churches, one of the main criticisms of the idea of this Decade was that it was too broad, not “exact” enough. “What kind of violence?” People would ask. The concept said everything and nothing at the same time, to some folks.

But to others', including me, the Decade resonated deeply. Overcoming Violence spoke to me as a faith imperative, a faith imperative expressed in the above passage: **Let Us Love One Another, because Love is from God.** This is a perfect way to launch into what this Decade means for faith communities and for Americans. What I mean to convey to you today is not a formula or a program, but an introduction, a vision, and a spirit.

First, I have two stories for you, two stories which I would call Love Stories, but perhaps not in the tradition of George and Gracie, or even Ben Affleck and Jennie from the Block. These stories are about people I have cared about; and they are about people who, for me, were living examples of the impact of Love on our Lives, living proof that **God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.**

So, my first story is a local story, one that happened to me in my work in Boston last year, before working for the World Council. I went one night to a residential treatment program, as I was there to attend one of my client's graduations. I worked as a reintegration specialist; this is a fancy way for saying I helped people in prison plan for their discharge, and followed up with them once they were out to assist them in carrying out their plans. So, I'll call this client Jim in order to tell the story. Jim is a person I came to feel in awe of when I was in his presence, and I do not mean this in any idealistic, flimsy sense. Jim knew that he had made some bad choices, choices that affected both himself and others in his life. He had a criminal record about two inches thick, had spent maybe a third of his life in prison, and another third taking and dealing heroin. He had both scars in his arms and many nice cars to show for his efforts. In addition, Jim had AIDS, Hep C, and lived in daily physical pain. And, in the time that I had gotten to know Jim, he is very close to dying.

Yet, day in and day out, when he came into the program that I worked in, Jim did not complain. And so, as we would play Scrabble in the Drop In Center we would talk as I was getting creamed, and I would say, “Look, Jim, you have every right to be grieving, angry, upset. You don't have to be so polite with me.” But Jim would not budge in his insistence that he was OK. Did he get

angry? I'm sure. Did he cry, did part of him hate his situation? Yes. But one day he said to me "Look young lady, I'm not going to die in the street. I know people here care about me. I've got no reason to complain." God, how brave he is, and what a spirit. He was a testament to John's words: **There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear.**

Another story occurred half way around the world, in Southern Africa. Two years ago, I had the privilege of attending the Anglican Students' Federation of Southern Africa's yearly conference. I was inspired by the work of then student organizer Francisco Zandamela in his conviction that international ties must be formed around concerns such as viable economic solutions and HIV. The conference title was "Transforming Victims into Victors" and the point was that our call in our histories – personal, interpersonal, communal, even international – is not to be victimized by the past or what we may see as "failures." Instead, the process of identifying both the stones and seeds in our own hearts provides us with the potential for how we ALL can engage in the process of transforming our histories, through the promise of Christ, into victories.

Francisco almost single-handedly organized a conference for young adults on HIV, a very important conference for this very at risk population in Southern Africa. Through the conference, many young people were inspired to get tested and to change behaviors that may put them at risk. Another inspiring piece of the conference for me was seeing connections formed from people from very different parts of the world. For me, Francisco's life, which ended tragically in a car crash six-months later, was a testament to John's truth: Those **who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.**

So, one way to enter into the spirit of the Decade to Overcome Violence is by reflecting upon our own journeys of our selves in communities. Where have we beheld the transforming impact of love in overcoming violence? Our own histories can provide us with a lens through which to see others in our own and in different communities, appreciating both our similarities and differences and the power that lies in each. Here, from my own life, I describe two witnesses of love. **There are many lessons to be gleaned about Love from these two stories, but the points I would emphasize as the take away message about love, is that 1) Love is Hard Work 2) We are the messengers, the bearers, the FRUITS of the Vine, of God's love. And sometimes, recognizing that we are the FRUITS of God's Love, is, in itself, the Hard work of Love. Within this lies a vision and a spirit of the Decade to Overcome Violence.**

As you can tell, even though both of these stories are from my life, neither are about me directly, as a self-described "messenger of love." In both cases, I was a little like Philip in the Acts text we heard today: God basically told me to get up and go. So, I got up and went. In both cases, I encountered someone: one person from a local community, another from a completely different country and context. In both cases, we had some similarities, but also some very significant differences, like the "Ethiopian" which Philip himself met. **We sat side by side and shared, and we "baptized" each other from our exchanges.**

Given our own stories, the example of Philip, the transforming impact of love and our place as "Fruits of the Vine": Who are we being called to love, as members of a faith community, and as Americans with a place in today's international scene? Where is our own hard work on Love's behalf? How do we love people who are different, how do we form these connections, and how do we convince ourselves that we have the capacity to bring this love into reality?

So yes, here's the hard part, why Love is such hard work: Even given Philip's example today and the inspiring words of John and 1 John, to what extent do I, do we all believe the fact that we really are God's fruits, to what extent do we believe, do we have faith in the fact that this love is in our hands? Thich Nat Hahn wrote in one of his books that as we move through life, we get "irritated hearts." What an understatement! We've received messages from many places about how worthy or, perhaps even more memorable, how unworthy we are. We've received messages about what is "realistic," or "possible." What if Philip had considered his unworthiness or how "realistic" it was to joint the Ethiopian and never gotten into the chariot? A connection between

two people, two very different people, would have been missed. And so would the opportunity for sacrament, for baptism. The quote I think that best illustrates this process is one made by one of my spiritual mentors, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He wrote and has preached that the most evil thing about apartheid is that it convinced God's children that they were not God's children. Working analogously and in synchronicity are the myriad ways in which we have encountered violence ourselves, the ways in which we have been told, even by those we care about and who care about us, that we are not the FRUITS that we are. In our minds, in our hearts, and even our physical bodies, we are not unlike Moses, who, as God has called us to Overcome Violence, we say "Oh God. But I have never been good with words. I don't want to be responsible. Please ask someone else."

In our imperfectness, our woundedness, we continue this cycle of hurt, we inflict it upon others and upon ourselves, internalizing the pain and even recreating the pain in our own lives. As part of my job, I worked with people who were convicted of sexual crimes and people who were survivors of sexual trauma, and I can't tell you how many times, in their own histories, they had lived through this pain as children and then, either as perpetrators or again as recipients or both, were still involved in the ongoing cycle of violence. The same can be true for other types of trauma, for addiction, and for oppression. How many times in these cycles of violence do we either inflict our hurt upon another or internalize the hatred onto ourselves? And these realities, these conditions that run antithetical to love -- addiction, and trauma and oppression -- all make our hearts more than "irritated", but downright festering wounds!

But, as Philip shows us, we can all get into the chariot. We can. Both Jim and Francisco, in different ways, exemplified love for me, and I had the gift of knowing them by climbing into the chariot, by taking that chance and trusting love. This is way we break the "cycle of violence" and Overcoming Violence, by being open to the possibilities and believing that we are worthy to receive them.

I met some young people yesterday who have all taken a chance to get into the chariot. They are participating in the Global Youth Initiative, and initiative aimed at reflecting upon how the United States relates to different countries in the world as a matter of faith. And for an introductory session, some very substantial discussions occurred: people talked about how power affects relationships: between coaches and players, between seventh and eighth graders, between communities and ultimately, between countries. People talked about the difference between dialogue and debate; whether, within different interactions, we are participating to understand or to beat another. And, participants began a path of seeing themselves as seeds, as the branches of the One True Vine, people whose faith can influence to course of relationships. It was a treat and extremely exciting for me to be here and witness the Seeds of this initiative here, and I look forward to our future sessions together.

Given the beginning of this project and the encounters I've described, here is a surprise: it is actually good news to know that Love is Hard Work. When we do confront hardship on this path, we know it is not because of our abilities, it is precisely because it is hard. That the fact that we make the choice to confront with our grief, our fears, individually and collectively ensures loves promise. The alternative is to continue the violence by attempting to escape the pain and the grief, through addiction, through entitlement, through multiplying the violence in our lives by living at the expense of others and at the expense of ourselves. I would suggest that, in responding to these challenges, we stop thinking of love as a noun and in terms of "Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks". Love is not a feeling, it is a process, and though we may make a choice for love for ourselves, in ourselves, it is also collective, as Philip shows us.

In this season of Easter, of rebirth and renewal, let us remember that love is a process, a verb, a condition, a way of being in the world with ourselves and others. Love exists in being, in being who we were created to be, in confronting the challenges of faith that have been set before us in our individual paths and I've climbing into the chariot next the "the Ethiopian," as challenging as that be. We all have been given true examples of this process of love, in our lives and in the lives

of our spiritual leaders, like Philip. Through Jesus' being born against all odds in a manger and his acceptance of his call, love became. Through Mohammed answering God's call and bringing his ministry into the world, love became. Through Hagar, Mohammed's very great grandmother, through her cries in the wilderness and her calling upon God's name (the first person in the Bible who did theology) the possibility of love was born. Love exists in the be-ing, this becoming, in the transformation of our grief and fears by making the choice to love and create the reality of unshakeable hope. Let us see ourselves as God's branches, and reach, and bloom. Amen.

**John 15:1-8**

**"I am the true vine, and my father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you . . . If you abide in me, and my words in abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."**

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