

“Blinded By the Light”
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Acts 9:1-20

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During the Easter season, we read stories about early Christians, known as followers of “the way.” Their stories tell us about their life altering events of experiencing the risen Christ. There’s no more dramatic story than the one from Acts telling how Saul (later known as Paul) went from being a terrifying and violent persecutor of Christians, to becoming himself, a Christian. His story starts out with Saul getting his marching orders; he was to go to Damascus and find the people who were on the high priests’ “hit list” because they preached Jesus. Saul is to stop them in their tracks, but instead it is Saul who is stopped in his tracks. He encounters the Christ and is “blinded by the light.” Everything he thought was true, isn’t. His understanding of the world is shattered. All he had staked his life on, is now seen to be a total misconception. And if this event isn’t terrifying enough, now he is now blind. He cannot see to make his way, a new way in the world. He must be led by the hand. He is a broken man.

Though not as dramatic as Saul’s, I, too, have had life altering events when what I thought was true, turned out to be an illusion. I’m guessing you may have had one or two of these experiences, yourself. When this happens, our sense of reality is shaken. We wonder if we can trust ourselves to perceive reality accurately and truthfully. And sometimes these events are so blinding that for a while we are emotionally immobilized so that we have stop and ponder what it all means. We are blinded by the light of a new reality that forever changes us.

For many people, this week brought one of these events. Monday began like most others, but between dawn and midnight hundreds, thousands of people mourned the loss of life on the campus of Virginia Tech. As the news broke I called my brother-in-law in Richmond, Virginia, because my niece, a senior in high school, had been in the final weeks of deciding where to go for college, and Virginia Tech was one of the schools where she had been accepted. My brother-in-law told me that just the day before, Caitlin had come in and announced that she had decided to go to Virginia Tech. I wondered if this would change her decision. Later the news just got worse and worse. So much loss, so much sorrow, so many young people whose sense of security and innocence was gone forever.

What makes us such a violent people? What makes violence so popular on TV, movies, and sports? Having had girls who played high levels of soccer, I was always amazed at how violent the game could become, not only for players, but for spectators. I often thought the parents should let the girls off to play soccer, and they go elsewhere for group therapy. At our house we don’t have cable, so our choices are limited, but in the evening it is hard to find a TV show that isn’t focused on crime and violence. TV and violent video games have become babysitters for kids with overworked and exhausted parents. No wonder our culture raises children who think that violence is the “norm” and peace an illusion. Violence perpetuates violence.

As a single parent in seminary with two kids and two jobs, I needed ways to entertain Brittany and Allison. They begged me for a Nintendo. When I was offered a used one, I gave in. The second day the two girls had it, they were playing a game that got rather intense and one got frustrated and socked her sister. Immediately, we got rid of the Nintendo and never had another in our house. Parenting is partly genes, partly luck, partly circumstances, and partly intentional consistent teaching. It is not just an accident that Brittany and Allison grew into young women focused on making the world better. Tom came into their lives and taught them that being a true “manly man” means respecting women, working from relational power, and never saying an unkind word. They were blessed with grandparents, Stan and Liz, to inspire and honor their growing. All children should be so blessed.

As Christians, as ones who claim ourselves to be followers of the way, we look to the risen Christ to inform how we are as people in our world. It is clear from reading the gospels that Jesus repudiates violence. Even the episode in the temple when he drives out the money changers and their animals is aggressive but the whip he fashions is one common to anyone

who tended animals; it was used as a herding device, not a weapon with which to beat. Jesus rejected any military use to confront the Romans.

Next to the Bible, this book, *Engaging the Powers*, by Walter Wink is the book I most value. To quote Walter Wink: "When reviled, Jesus' followers are to bless; when cursed, they are to pray for those who abuse them. They are to conform their lives to the life of Abba by loving even their enemies, just as God does, doing good to those that hate them...[Jesus] endured the cross rather than prove false to his own nonviolent way." (p.127, *Engaging the Powers*) This didn't mean Jesus was a pushover. It didn't mean Jesus never got angry. On the contrary, he found the means to forcefully engage the powers of evil in his time in ways that rendered them powerless. And for the first three centuries after Jesus, the church continued as a pacifist community, engaging the world powerfully, yet nonviolently.

It'd like to read to examples of what nonviolence looks like from Wink's book:

What looks to all the world like passivity may in fact be a third way. When Jackie Robinson became the first black player in major league baseball, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers pressed this intensely competitive athlete to agree that for three years he would take whatever abuse was heaped on him without a word. Robinson finally said, 'Mr. Rickey, are you looking for a negro who is afraid to fight back?' Rickey replied, 'I'm looking for a ball-player with guts enough not to fight back.'(p.190) Another example: *When Bishop Desmond Tutu was walking by a construction site on a temporary sidewalk the width of one person, a white man appeared at the other end, recognized Tutu, and said, 'I don't give way to gorillas.' At which Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, 'Ah yes, but I do.'* (p.191)

So here's the question: Could the Virginia Tech massacre be our nation's "on the road to Damascus" experience? When will we be so blinded by the light that we simply cannot continue the status quo of arming our people with semi-automatic weapons? One newspaper wrote: "It's so familiar you could write the script yourself. Only the names and the numbers change-- Jonesboro, Columbine, Lancaster county and now Virginia Tech." The outside world looks at us in amazement as we simply seem unable to bring ourselves to say "no" to violence and "no" to the availability of guns have become their own weapons of mass destruction. 65 million guns and rifles are legally owned by 40% of American households and 29,000 people are killed by a firearm each year; 29,000, that's more than a small city, more than the Americans killed in Iraq.

Another thing that bothers me about the news of this incident is that this event cannot just be blamed on mental illness while we ignore the issue of guns. If this young man had not killed himself, he would have been arrested and charged with murder, and he would have been hard pressed to prove himself mentally ill to a culture that mostly doesn't have a clue about mental illness. It's easier for us to excuse this tragedy to one mentally ill individual than to face the issue of gun control.

Given all we have witnessed and seem destined to witness in the future, dare we ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" I have yet to see a portrait of Jesus with an arsenal of weaponry. It just wasn't and isn't who Jesus is. The good news is: if Saul who had been feared for his violence against Christians could be "blinded by the light" and become a witness to the life of the nonviolent Jesus, if he could experience a reversal this drastic, perhaps there is hope for us as a people and a nation.

But it will take us all acting more like Jesus, bearing witness to a nonviolent way of living and being, modeling smart, intentional, and forceful means of changing our obsession with guns, of teaching our children the path of peace rather than violence, and of filling their and our minds and lives with peaceful images that become just as appealing and exciting as the gruesome crime scenes are on Law and Order. May Christ come to us and "blind us with his light". May we rise up and beat our "swords into plowshares" and create an earth fertile for new life and new beginnings.