

## Challenging the Mythology of Violence

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First, I want to thank you all for coming to this conference. The Episcopal Church aims to model at this gathering a civil and respectful conversation about violence in general and gun violence in particular — a dialogue that our society has not been able to accomplish. It arises out of a dream a number of us have had of gathering together Episcopalians from across the spectrum of geographical, political and theological differences to learn from each other, pray with each other, and discern together what the Spirit may be saying to us as church leaders. In order to do this, we need to agree to make this a safe space, a “condemnation-free zone” for the next three days.

It will not help us to pre-judge each other here. Do not assume that just because someone owns firearms that she or he is a right-wing violence-prone, conspiracy theorist who does not want to end gun violence in our cities, towns and rural places. And, on the other hand, do not assume that just because someone supports legislation to put limits on gun ownership that he or she is a left-wing un-American, Constitution-tearing snob who wants to take away your private property and who does not himself or herself own firearms. These are all unhelpful conversation starters, and not conducive to the building up of Christian community! So, leave all pre-judgments at the door, agreed?

What this means is that we are here to listen as much as we are here to advocate positions.

“Listening is the act of entering the skin of the other and wearing it for a time as if it were our own.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this climate of tolerance and respect that we can begin to address a major public health crisis in our country that increasingly is defining our image both here and abroad.

In the United States of America, the world’s only remaining superpower and self-proclaimed moral force for good in the world, 30,000 of its citizens are killed every year by firearms. Another estimated 100,000+ are shot every year, most of whom will carry permanent injuries, and all of whom will carry emotional scars for the rest of their lives. Just think about these figures — what it means is that every 8-to -10 years, one million people are shot in this country.

This comes at a tremendous cost to our society: one million emergency room scenes, one million families grieving, one million victims and survivors trying to put broken bodies and wounded souls back together again. The financial costs to our health system, the long-term

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<sup>1</sup> David Spangler, *Parent as Mystic, Mystic as Parent*

costs of physical rehabilitation, and the emotional costs to the victims and their families lasts for decades.

The violence affects us all. Whether it is in the middle class enclaves of Newtown, CT, on a native reservation in the Dakota plains, a school campus in Colorado, an Army base in Texas, or on some forgotten street in Baltimore, Maryland — we are a nation in mourning over the killing of its children.

What's going to stop the epidemic of violence in our state, in our country, and in our world? The Christian Gospel has proclaimed for thousands of years that there is a cure – but we have lost confidence in our day that that ancient solution will still work. For according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cure for violence is *love*. Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you...” (Luke 6:27)

What? Our violence-ridden culture would have us believe that what Jesus said in the gospel were wonderful words back then 2,000 years ago, and they may have worked well back there in Galilee, but we live in the real world in a very dangerous 21st century. Love your enemies? No, we must fight our enemies, outwit and outmaneuver our enemies, destroy and kill our enemies before they destroy and kill us.

And yet, Martin Luther King Jr., many years ago had this to say about these words of Jesus:

“Jesus has become the practical realist...Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, the command [to love others] is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.”<sup>2</sup>

But how can it actually work?

Gerald May, Christian psychotherapist and spiritual guide at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in the Washington area, once recounted this story:

“It was in 1976, and I had just received my first-level belt in the gentle Japanese martial art of Aikido: the practice (do) of the harmony (ai) of the universal energy (ki). A visiting master called me to the front of the room and asked me to attack him. He stood quietly as I charged at him, then turned his head slightly away. My speed increased as I felt powerfully drawn toward him. Then he bowed his head slightly and looked back at me, and I found myself lying comfortably on the floor. We had not even touched...He explained that he had aligned himself with my attacking energy, joined it from his own centered stillness, and gently guided it back around

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<sup>2</sup> November 17, 1957

me to towards the ground. From my perspective, it seemed I had inexplicably decided to lie down and rest.”

What was that force, that non-violent power?

Power, in human terms, is the ability and use of force to accomplish one’s will over persons and situations. But *dunamis*, the word for “power” which occurs over 120 times in the New Testament, is a creative, dynamic power that is very different from the “power over” aspects of human force or control. It is spiritual power; the power that can only come from God.

As for human, or worldly, power, the United States is unquestionably the most powerful nation the world has ever known. We have unparalleled economic power, so much so that it is said when the US economy sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold. We have immense technological power that enables American influence and culture to be felt to the farthest reaches of the earth — even into the universe. We have unmatched military power, with capabilities of destroying targets with pinpoint accuracy from thousands of miles away.

And yet, with all the power that is possible to acquire on this earth, still the United States of America is not able to force the rest of the world to act in accordance with our will, or to further our own national goals wherever and whenever we desire. Despite our massive power in human terms, we frequently find ourselves powerless to get persons or situations under our control. We find that we cannot force others to do what they do not want to do. So we need to make a distinction between power on the one hand, and control on the other.

To illustrate the difference, I want to tell you a story.

Several years ago in Mason, Tennessee, an elderly black woman named Louise Degrafinried astounded the nation when she persuaded an escaped convict from a local prison to surrender. He had a gun, and with his gun, he thought he had control. He had surprised her husband Nathan outside their modest home and forced him inside.

But Louise was not afraid of the gun. The short, grandmotherly woman told the convict to put his gun down while she fixed him some breakfast. Now, if you’ve never had a Southern home-cooked breakfast, you haven’t experienced the amazingly curative powers of fat, butter, grits and molasses! While cooking the meal, Louise spoke of her faith and how a young man such as he should behave, and that with God’s help he could turn his life around. In no time at all, the young man was on his way back to the Tennessee prison.

The escaped convict had control, the control of the gun, but Louise Degrafinried had power.

There is a fundamental distinction between control and power. It is very important that we see it, both in our personal lives, in society, and in our theology. God, we say, is

“omnipotent” — all powerful — and that is true, but we must not confuse that with control. God is all-power, but not all-control. God has plenty of power, but chooses to exercise little control over the world.

The unchecked human need for control arises out of fear: fear of a chaotic and unsafe world. “If only the world were more predictable,” we think, “then I would feel better, certainly safer.” It is because of fear that humans tend to theologize a controlling God. Thus we also tend to believe that it is our duty, led by a controlling God, to control others by any of the means of control at our disposal — especially weapons.

But the agenda of God is not to control, but to love. Love always seeks the best for the beloved, even at great cost. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...not to condemn the world [but to save it].” (John 3:16-17)

The power of love to change the world cannot be underestimated. To quote Martin Luther King, Jr. again, he called that kind of power “soul force.” Our great American civil rights leader learned the principles of soul force from his reading of the ethics of Jesus, and from Gandhi’s use of the phrase to describe his methods of nonviolent resistance.

In terms of social change, “soul force” is based in the power of an idea: freedom. If our great nation has any real power at all, it is in the abundance of freedom that we enjoy here and our willingness to share this power with the world. It is the only export we have that has power over others — not money, not bombs, not self-interest, but freedom. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa once said, “When a people decide they want to be free, the nothing can stop them.” They can even stare down the barrel of a gun — and they will prevail.

This soul force is not only the power to change human lives, but it is the most effective force that is available to humans to change whole societies toward the vision of God for the world. In the book, *A Force More Powerful*. written by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall in 2000, the authors carefully document over 15 movements of mass social change that have resisted systems of injustice on every continent of the world. They concluded that the 20th century should have been known as the century that has demonstrated the triumph of nonviolent action as the most powerful force toward freedom in the world. This massive and well-documented book (also turned into a film by PBS), reminds us that:

— it wasn’t physical force that drove the mighty British empire from colonial India in 1947... it was soul force.

— it wasn’t physical force that successfully resisted the Nazis in Denmark and saved many Jews...

— it wasn't physical force that brought down the dictator General Martinez in El Salvador in 1944...

— it wasn't physical force that brought down segregation in the American South in 50's and 60's...

— it wasn't physical force that restored democracy to the Philippines in 1986...

— it wasn't physical force that moved Lech Walesa and Solidarity into power in Poland...

— it wasn't physical force that brought down totalitarian regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe...

— it wasn't physical force that dismantled apartheid and racist government in South Africa...

In each case, it was soul force.

If the above representative list seems new or shocking to you, it is because we have done a poor job in this country of teaching any of the principles of nonviolent action as a way of solving conflicts.

Many fear that our culture will never do this because we have become intoxicated with violence as the only effective means to achieve our personal and national aspirations. We have worshiped for too long at the altar of the gun to solve our problems. This has led to what can be called "The Mythology of Violence," namely the widely held myth that violence works, and that nonviolence is a pipe dream for idealists who do not know how the world really operates.

I want to emphasize here that there is a time-honored tradition in Christianity of sometimes having to resort to a "Just War" in certain extraordinary circumstances, and we are very dependent upon our brave men and women in the armed forces who are sometimes called upon to fight and put themselves in harm's way on our behalf. We are grateful for their service; we pray for them and for our leaders to make wise decisions before sending them into armed conflict. But one need not be a pacifist like Jesus, Gandhi or King to learn any of the almost 200 methods of nonviolent action that have been proven to be effective in removing unjust institutions and governments, and in restoring peace and freedom.

As Christians, as followers of Christ, we are called upon to teach peace as well as to practice peace, which means we have to continually re-learn the ways of peace in a culture that's awash in violence. We must repent, both individually and collectively, for believing that violence and killing is the only way towards peace.

Just this past week I had the privilege of spending some time in Baltimore with the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams who was there to give a lecture. I told him about this conference addressing violence, and reminded him of some words he said 11 years ago that had a profound effect on me in my thinking about violence.

It was in early 2003 when our nation was embroiled in an intense debate on whether or not the United States should invade Iraq to address the problem of Saddam Hussein and his supposed weapons of mass destruction there. Dr. Williams said at that time, "If all you have are hammers, then all you see are nails."

His warning was clear. If we put our trust only in guns and bombs to make peace, then we only see solutions that demand the use of guns and bombs.

Perhaps Martin Luther King can teach us once again how to "live together as [family] or die together as fools." In a sermon given at the height of the civil rights struggle, he said:

"To our most bitter opponents we say, 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'"

That is the power of love, even for one's enemies.