

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. SUNDAY
“VIOLENCE IN AMERICA”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
JANUARY 16, 2011
Habakkuk 1:4
ALL SERVICES**

A few days ago, up in the International Space Station, Scott Kelly, the commanding officer, spoke over the radio as flight controllers in Houston fell silent. This is what he had to say: **“As I look out the window, I see a very beautiful planet that seems very inviting and peaceful. Unfortunately, it is not. These days, we are constantly reminded of the unspeakable acts of violence and damage we can inflict upon one another, not just with our actions, but also with our irresponsible words.”**

“We're better than this,” he added. **“We must do better.”**

Today is **Human Relations Sunday** in the United Methodist Church. It is also **Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday**, reminding us that 82 years ago Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born and forty-two years ago he was gunned down while standing on a balcony in Memphis Tennessee. Just a few days ago Scott Kelly's sister-in-law, Congresswoman, Gabrielle Gifford, was shot in the head in Arizona while staffing a booth where citizens could come to share their views and air their complaints. Two different events spanning more than 40 years but in the interval, thousands upon thousands of innocent children, women and men have died, victims of the assassin's bullet, and many of these have died as part of a mass murder incident.

Of course, the bullets were flying long before Dr. King died. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated before him, and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was also assassinated shortly after him.

America is many things and much of it good. No one can argue with at that point. But our topic this morning is not about America's goodness, but America's illness. Even to the casual observer, America is a victim of the virus of violence,

and America is a patient who can't seem to recover from this dangerous disease. Hear these words from the Prophet Habakkuk: ***“So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted” (1:4).***

It doesn't help to say that our illness is self-inflicted. What matters is to decide how we're going to treat the disease or learn to live with the virus of violence.

When we get sick or our children get sick - a cold, the flu, the chicken pox, the measles, the mumps - we're surprised, but only with the timing; we know that sickness happens, we're just surprised that it comes when it comes. Perhaps we're saddened - we feel badly for the child or those afflicted, we grieve for their pain, and we wonder why - what caused the illness? Inside our hearts, we know that we're going to get sick again and our children will get sick again. It's a part of the human experience.

The event that occurred in Arizona reminds us that America is sick. We're sick. Granted, we're not always **feeling** sick and while violence is going on somewhere, in the communities where we live, we might be untouched by violence-for now. But the country is sick. Like some sexually transmitted diseases, the illness lies dormant for a while and then suddenly there's a flare-up. And then we're shocked that this has happened again. We knew it would but somehow it surprises us. We're saddened because we can empathize with those who are grieving. Our task now is to take up this national debate as to how we can treat this virus of violence.

But let me assure you, this virus is never really dormant. While one community may be at rest, somewhere else in our country, perhaps in many places, there are communities that are mourning an outbreak of violence. A child is hit by a stray bullet, a 7-Eleven clerk is robbed and murdered for \$24 and change, a mail-sorter is killed at work by a disgruntled postal worker, a teenager is the target of the same bully for the entire school year, an ex-husband murders the ex-wife, a child kills his parent. You've read the stories; you've heard them. They go on and on. Not a single week passes in this country where we do not hear of children dying in cities all across America - to accidental shootings, gang-related, or in school yards and even in classrooms. If this was coming from outside of our country, we would say that we're under siege. We are infected with this virus of violence. The situation has become so bad, that many schools require students, teachers, staff and visitors to pass through metal detectors. Some authorities advocate arming teachers so they can fight violence with violence. These same folk suggest creating textbooks with Kevlar covers so that students can use their school books as shields when the

bullets start flying. Security cameras are mounted in the hallways of many schools.

Can we say that this will change? Can we preach that the Peaceful Kingdom is coming if we would provide better treatment for the mentally ill, tighten up and strengthen our gun control measures, do a better job in getting our young people into a religious culture that effectively teaches the values of love and respect? Is it really possible to preach the vision of Isaiah that someday the wolf and the lamb will lie down together?

No, not really. That's an eschatological vision that belongs to a kingdom that only God can usher in. Perhaps that's why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that we must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope.

So how do we deal with this virus of violence? Is an antidote available?

As Christians we are called to advocate for change. So if you can help educational and government and institutional agencies do a better job treating the mentally ill, do it. If you can lobby for gun control measures that are effective, do it. If you can use your voice to help soften the rhetoric and encourage civil discourse, do it. The Bible says: ***“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause” (Isaiah 1:17).*** Dr. King said: ***“If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well.”*** We are obligated to do what we can. That certainly is consistent with the teachings of John Wesley.

We should never return evil for evil. A violent action is not an option for the Christian. We must embrace peace as a life-style choice. Our faith teaches us to never lift our voice or our hand against another living creature. The apostle Paul, writing to the Romans, urges, ***“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all (12:18).”*** ***“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).***

Martin Luther King, once said, ***“Non-violence is a powerful and just weapon. It is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.”***

The Christian experience teaches us to resist the temptation to mimic the masses, to succumb to the contagion of the crowd, to be a sheep in a herd of sheep blindly following a wolf into a den of destruction, to a cog in the machinery of violence. Our thinking must be elevated to a higher plane. Paul says, ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect”*** (Romans 12:1-2). **Not only have we been transformed, we are transformative.** Our role is to help others to transform and renew their minds.

The core of the Christian teaching is love: agape love. The Bible is clear that we are to love ourselves, love our neighbor, and love our enemies. This is a principle which we must first embrace ourselves, before we can teach it to others. Dr. King was right when he said that agape love is **“disinterested”** love. **“Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. Therefore, agape makes no distinction between friend and enemy; it is directed toward both.”**

Of course, none of this will remove the virus of violence from America. But all of this can make a difference in the place where we live. Agape love will bring healing where it's possible to bring healing. It's our only option. As Dr. King said: **“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”**

As we grieve for 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green who was born on 9/11 and is the grand-daughter of former Major League Baseball manager Dallas Green; as we mourn for Federal judge John Roll, and Phyliss Schneck, Gabe Zimmerman, Dorothy Morris and Dorwan Stoddard as well as the 14 who were injured in this slaughter, and as we pray for a complete recovery for Congresswoman Gifford, and as we also pray for the young man who perpetrated this evil, we should always remember the words of the Bible, ***“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up”*** (Galatians 6:9).

If you believe as Dr. King believed on this MLK Sunday that **“The time is always right to do what is right”** I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.