

THE VIOLENCE OF GOOD PEOPLE

TEXT: HABAKKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4 AND LUKE 19:1-10

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Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church Durham, NC

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PRAYER:

Guide us O God by Your Word and Spirit; that in your light we may see light; in Your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

Former Presidential adviser and economist John Kenneth Galbraith has observed that

"Increasingly people in America are divided between those who want the catharsis of total violence and those who want the comfort of total escape."

This observation carries a capacity to illuminate what is occurring in our society and within the Protestant Church. This observation also carries with it some Stewardship implications.

Indeed there are many today who, for different reasons, seek the catharsis of total violence. Allow me to call the roll of places where acts of this group have transpired; Ruby Ridge, Idaho..., New York City's World Trade Center..., Pan-Am 103 and Lockerbie, Scotland..., The Arizona desert sabotage of The AMTRAK Railway System..., The Federal Building of Oklahoma City..., There is The Michigan Militia. Or the radical fringe of the National Rifle Association which advocates the abolition of gun control legislation.

The catharsis of total violence represents one dominant pole in our common life.

Yet, there is evidence that many in our land seek the comfort of total escape.

Allow me to call the roll of this group. These are the good people who whine about

preserving the law and order which they work so hard to obey...these are the good people who worry about the violence done to our society by those who are promiscuous. Good people fear that the promiscuous allow their children to drift into truancy and they fail to encourage their children to stay in school and complete their education, and they fail to work for better schools in their own neighborhoods. These are the good people who feel men such as Minister Farrakkhan of the Nation of Islam are the great threat to our society.

These are not only the good people; these are the good **religious people**. These people have been turned off by recent trends and have begun to talk of enough has been done for Civil Rights and believe it is time to turn back Affirmative Action programs. These are the people who join their voices to Habakkuk and ask, "**How long Oh Lord shall I cry to thee of violence and thou wilt not hear?**"

These are the good people who turn off their Television picture of the world's violence and write their congressman not to capitulate on the Contract with America or to appease people of violence and to stand up for a principle. i.e. "Cut my taxes and reduce government spending, but don't touch any of my entitlements which I have earned". Reduce what you give to those who don't work as hard as I.

The comfort of total escape represents the other dominant pole in our common life.

BODY:

I. The Link

What I would respectfully direct your attention to, is the profound way these two poles of response, total violence and total escape are linked. The connection is subtle and qualitative. It is the category of violence. Both poles participate in violence.

For one pole the violence is hot, clear, a scream, a fist, a fire bomb, a brick, a gun...For the other violence is cool, once removed, exercised through the sin of omission, and violates others through the use of respectability and morality. This second pole is the violence of good people.

Habakkuk indicates that wealth is treacherous and the arrogant do not endure. There is an equation between wealth and violence. In Zaccheus Jesus in encounters

a man who has abused the public trust and in the process had defrauded the people he should be serving. Again we encounter the suggestion of violence and money.

II. Habakkuk

If the union of these two poles can be seen in the category of violence of all against all, then the words we have before this morning from Habakkuk are an evaluation of the violence of good people.

For the situation against which Habakkuk wrote was against the good person. Habakkuk was concerned about those good people who resisted God's prophets and the pleas to keep the covenant. Habakkuk's time was a period when the external law was being carefully observed, but justice, mercy and faith were ignored. It was a time when the prophet Habakkuk measured violence by the failure of good people to respond to the call of God. Habakkuk said his time was time when justice was damned up by good people turning away from their neighbors through self-justification and self-preservation.

For the person who seeks to honor the authority of scripture, violence is primarily, though not exclusively, the work of one who turns away from goodwill for all and asserts private goods, rights, interests and comforts.

III Zaccheus

We see in Zaccheus the violence of a good man made rich by his career as a tax collector. Zaccheus has sought to be a privately righteous person while working in and participating in a program of Roman economic imperialism that robbed and crushed his neighbors. Zaccheus' dichotomous life is blight upon his community's common life. Zaccheus is "a chief tax collector" which implicates him more deeply in the corrupt tax system of his day. In a corrupt system the loftier a person's position the greater is their complicity. We see in Zaccheus what happens when the individual is willing to sacrifice the common life for his own benefit. Zaccheus has failed to recognize his membership in his community. Zaccheus has decided that the community shall do for him, rather than he shall do for his community.

IV. Observations

It seems to me that the violence of good people happens because good people fail to have confidence in espoused values. For instance, there is the issue of "family values". Good people will state that the secret to strength and personal

responsibility comes in the family. Yet good people are afraid of the influence of city children on our children. We fear those who are supposedly "beneath us" in class or education.

The fundamental source of violence in our land is the same as it was in Habakkuk's community and in Zaccheus' Province, the violence of good people. The tragedy of this violence is that it scars all who are concerned. Any violence done by one man to another is violence done unto the perpetrator. The violence of good people destroys the humanity and the divinity of good people, just as rapidly as it destroys the victims of violence. The catharsis of total violence will succeed only when good people do nothing. Not doing what we can do is a fundamental form of violence.

V. Stewardship Application

There is also the fear of pledging a tithe. "I can't afford to tithe." I need whatever I have accumulated for my own responsibilities and commitments.

As I review the story of salvation coming to Zaccheus, I see a man who is healed from his violent ways through his heart and his money. Zaccheus displays qualities upon which a life of discipleship can be built. He has an intense desire to see Jesus. He is willing to overcome ridicule and embarrassment to experience salvation. Zaccheus knows that the price for his personal, social and spiritual wealth has been too high.

Winston Churchill once observed, **"There is a difference between earning a living and making a life. The difference can be seen when we consider the difference between what we give and what we keep."**

Zaccheus extends hospitality to Jesus and knows that he must go beyond legal restitution. Zaccheus sees the scars from his once-removed form of violence. Voluntary restitution calls for a return of the original amount plus 20 percent, compulsory restitution called for doubling the original amount and in some cases repaying fourfold. Zaccheus offers restitution which can be seen as an example of the radical nature of God's Grace and the Power of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus links repentance of the heart with the value of a visible financial transaction.

What we are talking about here is a pledge. Zaccheus' pledge is a manifestation of the message of salvation entering into the heart of one good person.

God's Love reaches out and touches Zaccheus. Zaccheus' life is changed. The change is real. Zaccheus sees his money in a new light. He sees what he has managed to accumulate in the, light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION:

Have I sounded overly pessimistic this morning? If so, forgive me! I am concerned that we fix our eyes not only on the obvious forms of violence done; but that we seriously ask ourselves in the name of Jesus Christ,

What is my share? What is it God wants me to do to alleviate the oppression of others and of those who hate?

We are being put to the test on whether or not we can love our enemy and those who despise and persecute. I feel deeply that we can meet the test if we trust in the relationship to which we have been drawn together through the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Power of the Holy Spirit.

If we choose to ignore these words, I have two words for us.

The first from G. K Chesterton, in his **Ballad of the White Horse:**

**I tell you; naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet,
And the sea rises higher.**

The second from Luke:

**Today, Salvation has come to this house (FAMILY VALUES???)
Because he too is a son of Abraham;
For the Son of Man came to seek
And to save the lost".**