



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Stand Your Ground And The Gospel

March 1, 2014

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

You know how sometimes you read something and it is so strange that you can't get your mind around it? I had one of those moments this week when I read what retired Lt. General William Boykin, formerly a top ranking advisor at the Pentagon, had to say about Jesus. He said, "The Lord is a warrior and in Revelation 19 it says when he comes back, he's coming back as what? A warrior. A mighty warrior leading a mighty army, riding a white horse with a blood-stained white robe ... I believe that blood on that robe is the blood of his enemies 'cause he's coming back as a warrior carrying a sword. And I believe now - I've checked this out - I believe that sword he'll be carrying when he comes back is an AR-15 (assault rifle)...so if you don't have one, go get one. You're supposed to have one. It's biblical."

Boykin further elaborated on his impression of an aggressive, rough-and-ready Jesus declaring, "He was a man. He was a man's man, but we feminized him in the church ... He was a tough guy and that's the Jesus that I want to be like. That's the side that I want to be like." (Huffington Post, 2/20/2014).

I hope you see why I have a hard time getting my head around this. I'm also having a hard time objecting to it without being judgmental. I don't think I'm doing a very good job there.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

I have preached about this passage before, but it's never a bad thing to lift up. The word "resist" here implies "to resist with force." Jesus is saying, do not respond to violence with violence, but find another way. He creates the template for non-violent resistance to abusive power and gives us a way out of the spiral of violence. But I guess that for some people, that's just not fun. It's too vulnerable which feels like weakness.

We have a crisis in this country right now. The culture of fear and violence has erupted. People have convinced themselves that unless they are armed and ready to shoot, they won't make it home from the movies alive. Of particular note are laws that encourage people to shoot first. The Stand Your Ground laws have absolved people of the responsibility of caution. If you imagine that you might be in danger, you have the right to use deadly force. You have no responsibility to get out of the way or drive away from the perceived threat. There are now several acquittals in the deaths of unarmed young people, on the grounds that someone felt threatened even though there was really no reason to be scared. The other piece of this is that all of the young people have been black. Scared, armed white people can now kill black kids and get away with it just by saying, "I was sure they were going to hurt me." There are laws that allow this in 24 states now. It makes me want to curl up and weep. I keep

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hearing the words of Jesus, "love your enemy." Love the one who frightens you. Don't shoot them for they are your brothers and sisters.

Not everyone has pulled the covers up over their heads like I have. One who has courageously stepped forward is Dr. Michael Bledsoe, the Pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, DC. He also teaches at the Divinity School at Howard University, an historic African-American school. This week, the trial in Florida of Michael Dunn, who killed an unarmed black boy and wounded three others because their music was too loud, ended with a bizarre verdict. The jury found him guilty of attempted murder, but couldn't convict him in the death of Jordan Davis because they agreed that Mr. Dunn was reasonably afraid for his life. Pastor Bledsoe wrote a letter and posted it on his church's website. It has created quite a firestorm. Some of you saw it, I posted it to my Facebook page, and then I wrote to him and asked if I could read his letter to you today.

I said, "We here in Connecticut have barely begun to find our equilibrium after the Newtown/Sandy Hook shootings. It's odd that the mental illness component makes it easier to understand. The inhumanity manifested by supposedly sane people now shooting at-will at anything they don't like is incomprehensible. Thank you for saying what we all should be saying." He wrote back. "Thank you for your affirmation and kind words. Of course you may read my "open letter"--it has now been viewed over 50,000 times which is amazing all by itself, but when you consider I, pastor of a church of 125 souls whose daily web traffic is about 15 visits a day, well, you can see that this is an Internet phenomenon. I think what it also reveals is how desperately people, both black and white, want this madness remedied. And you are spot on about placing this discussion in the larger discussion about gun violence in our nation. Our country is terribly sick.

By the way, let me ask you to do this if you end up reading my letter: please convey my gratitude to your colleagues because so many Episcopalian priests across the country have written to me this week and blessed me. I have been so impressed by how you have rallied to this letter and its writer. Your voices have been a sweet relief from some of the horrible things said to me this week. I'm going to do my best to find an Episcopalian priest and hug them. At the very least, I render a prayer of thanks for you."

Here is his letter...

Dear White Christians of Florida:

Far be it that I, a white clergyman who is not a lawyer, instruct you as to the illogical nature of your "stand your ground" license to kill, but let us note something that is apparent now after two cases where your predominantly white juries could not agree to convict a man who admitted he killed an unarmed teenager: if you convict a person for attempting to murder ten teens but fail to convict the killer for actually killing a teen, then you have incentivized killing since, not only on the face of it but in actuality, you have told the person we will not convict you for killing a black, unarmed teenager but we will imprison you for attempting it....

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Here is my premise and I dare you to prove me wrong: if white Christians in Florida stood up and cried out for justice, demanding an end to the license-to-kill-stand-your-ground law, it would be rescinded immediately. Where is your conscience? Where is the little light you promised to shine for Christ? You have put it beneath a bushel and suffocated it. You know as well as anyone that teenagers should not be killed for playing loud music. But then, we all know don't we, that Jordan Davis was not killed for playing loud music. He was killed for being an uppity black kid who dared to smart off to a drunken white man with a concealed weapons permit. Speak up, for Christ's sake, for the sake of your conscience, and because you know in your heart of hearts that had a black man killed your white son playing music in a car with friends, you probably would not have to be demanding he be tried.

White Christians of Florida, speak up for justice. Stand up and demand that this license for murder be removed from your books, from your lives. Stop defending it. It is but a few steps removed from lynching. And you recall, do you not, that the center of the Gospels is the story of the passion of our Lord who was lynched by Romans who perceived him as a threat?

I'll end with a word from the great neo-Orthodox theologian Karl Barth, a man acquainted with evil in the form of Nazism and who, along with a small group of other ministers, signed the Barmen Declaration, refusing to swear an oath to the Fuhrer. This is what he said in the 20th century—it is as apt today for your hearing as then: "The time is not always ripe. It may be past; it may be still to come. But woe to the church if when the time does come it is silent...."

Speak up for justice. Rescind Stand Your Ground for the blasphemous sham it is. Do it because were the roles reversed, you would want someone to cry out for your murdered child."

I've really struggled with this; how do Christians hold one another accountable to the Gospel? I do not agree with how he said everything, but I know that someone needed to stand up and say, we Christians do not follow a gun-toting Jesus. We do not believe in fear. We believe in love.