

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche
Bishop of New York

Columbia University Student Chaplaincy, New York, NY
Sunday, April 21, 2013 at 6:10pm
The Fourth Sunday of Easter • John 10:22-30

The Reverend Richard Sloan, Chaplain

It's good to be in church, because this has been an extraordinarily disturbing week, and heartbreaking. On a beautiful spring Sunday morning like this, a Sunday morning in Easter, we would want to be able to speak only of beautiful things, but we have lived through circumstances this week which require a pulpit response, and this morning I am going to talk of the terrible and violent things we have seen. We will have to go into that darkness, but I promise you that we will find Easter in there, and, I trust, a glimpse of redemption.

Two months ago, Margaret and I learned that our friend Nicky, a neighbor at our little mountain retreat in the Catskills, had been murdered and left in his basement, and that before his killer turned the gun on herself she set fire to his house and burned it to the ground. Six days ago I stood on that burned rubble with Nicky's brother Pat as he began to salvage what he could from what remained of his home, when we heard on the radio that there had been a bombing at the Boston Marathon. We were standing in a crime scene -- the yellow police tape was still across the driveway -- when we learned of this act of terror, a bigger murder, one which would capture the attention of the whole world. Violence upon violence. Violence near and violence far.

Later in the week I traveled to Baltimore to join bishops and representatives from dioceses across the Episcopal Church to begin developing a nationwide Episcopal Church Summit for 2014 about how to make a Christian response to violence. We who are rocked continually by stories of violence which vie with one another to be the most horrific, the most heartbreaking, we who minister in cities where children are being killed every day in our streets, needed to pray together and to figure out what claims a Christian may make in the face of such bloodshed and all those tears. What does Jesus give us to say? How may we proclaim the gospel of the Prince of Peace where there is no peace? And all day on Friday, as we talked of God and of the love of God for all people in Christ, we monitored the story from Boston. Some had family there, even right in Watertown, and for them the background for our work was a real and present fear for the ones they love. Jesus said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. As we shared with one another the stories of the violence that has touched our lives or the lives of those we serve and those we love, and with all eyes on the manhunt in Boston and more dying even as we gathered, it was easy to imagine that America is dying by the sword.

Jesus said that those who are of his flock have ears to hear and recognize his voice. He said that no one will be able to snatch them out of his hand. He said this in the Portico of Solomon, when he was asked once again if he was the Messiah, and John tells us that they waited for his answer "in suspense." Lots and lots of people in our day and place have religious questions, and I am here to tell you that if you strap on the clerical collar and go out in the noonday sun you do get asked them all the time. People want to know about God, but actually in

our culture we wear religion lightly, we consider it a personal matter -- no one else's business -- we understand church to be a "lifestyle choice," and we place no religious expectations on anyone. This alone makes us fundamentally different from the people to whom Jesus was speaking. Even different from Jesus himself. These matters of salvation were of extreme importance to Jesus and the people he encountered. They were in suspense. These were life and death matters, and nothing could be more urgent for them than the claims of Jesus and the demands that those claims make on people's lives and allegiances. And that urgency is at the center of Jesus' answer to them. "No one will be able to snatch my sheep from my hand." And I read that and wonder: *snatch them from his hand!* Who does he mean? What forces of darkness does he refer to? What spiritual adversaries?

Jesus seems to say that there are many forces active in the world. There is the Holy Spirit of God, working in and through Jesus, and inactive in no place, and there are other spirits. Not all of them benign. And you can be snatched. Possessed. So, he says, be possessed of good; be snatched out of this world by God and not another, and listen to the voice of Jesus that you may recognize in his words the Word of God, and there you will find strength for the journey, protection in the world. Maybe protection *from* the world.

At the heart of our Christian enterprise there is a choice. We choose what kind of men and women we will be, we get to make the decision about whether or not we can be counted on and why, we get to choose in whose allegiance we will live and in whose protection we will prosper. We get to choose whose voice to hear. And we make that choice in baptism. When we are infants that choice is made for us by others, but the day comes, as for a couple among us it comes this evening, when we are called to step up and stand up and take those promises and commitments on ourselves. And what are they? "Do you renounce Satan and do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world and do you put your whole trust in Jesus' grace and love? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God, and do you promise to follow and obey Christ as your Lord?" I consider these promises to be among the most important anyone will make in their life, and I am convinced that it is the responsibility of all men and women to at some point demonstrate and declare their convictions before God and the world. To renounce that which tears apart and tears down and to bind themselves to that which builds up, nurtures, supports and promotes life. This his morning I will ask these candidates for confirmation to renew those promises and recommit themselves to the choice for Jesus. And on this particular Sunday, after the week we have had, I want to say that somewhere in those renunciations and affirmations is the response which Christians can and must make to a violent world.

Early Friday evening I began driving back to New York, and in the darkness of the highway I listened to the unfolding drama from Boston. And then as I approached our city, I heard that the last of the two suspects in Monday's bombing had been found and arrested, and I heard that the people of Boston poured into the street, celebrating that arrest, and gratefully acclaiming the work of the police, and cheering the good news. The police found the boy covered in his own blood, silent, hiding under the tarp of a boat, his brother dead, the whole world tracking him, and with the memory of the terrible things he had done. Done on Monday and done that very day. Was he remorseful? The events of those very hours would suggest he was not. Maybe he was

sorry, or maybe he was sorry he was in trouble, or maybe he was lying there trying to figure out how to get hold of another gun.

But before we cast him into outer darkness, before we take to the streets in jubilation, let us take a second's pause, and see him in that boat, a young man who did the worst things a man can do, whom we find in the searing loneliness of his own making and the despairing consequence of his own sin, but in whom, if we try, we may still recognize a fallen brother. I suspect that as we consider what a Christian response to violence might be, a big part of the answer will be found in what we discover to be our Christian response to him.

On August 20, 1965, Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian from New Hampshire, was shot and killed in Hayneville, Alabama. He was a Freedom Rider, one who answered the call of Martin Luther King to come south and register voters and work for the Civil Rights Movement. On that awful day, he and a Roman Catholic priest and two young African American girls, who had been arrested and jailed but now were set free, were confronted by Thomas Coleman, a bigoted segregationist deputy sheriff. Coleman leveled his shotgun toward one of the girls, but Daniels threw himself in front of her and took the blast in his own body and was killed outright. Now every August we in the Episcopal Church commemorate him on his feast day. The girl he saved, Ruby Sales, went on to attend his same seminary and has founded an inner-city mission in Washington D.C. dedicated to his memory.

Some miles away, a Methodist minister and pivotal Civil Rights figure, Will Campbell, was in a motel room with his brother Joe and an old friend, a small town newspaper publisher and atheist named P.D. East. Will Campbell was a bosom friend of Jonathan Daniels. Quite some time earlier Campbell had been out driving with P.D. East, who was not a believer. They were engaged in one of their regular arguments about religion, and finally P.D. East in frustration asked Campbell to give a definition of Christianity in ten words or less. Campbell responded, "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway." P.D. East was disgusted and offered Campbell the chance to try again with the two remaining words, but Campbell said he would live with what he said.

The phone rang in the motel room and Joe answered it. He came back and laid his hand on Will's shoulder and told him that Jonathan was dead. Will Campbell collapsed into despondent grief. And P.D. East pulled his chair over to Will and sat close in before him and laid his hand on Will's knee. "Will," he asked, "do you remember that definition of Christianity you once gave me -- we're all bastards but God loves us anyway?" Will said he remembered. P.D. asked, "Will, is Thomas Coleman a bastard?" Will said he was. So P.D. asked, "And was Jonathan a bastard?" Joe sprung up in protest, but P.D. pressed on. He said he needed to know the answer to that question. So Will grudgingly admitted that, yes, Jonathan was a bastard too. Then P.D. pulled up even closer and said, "Well, here's the thing I need to know. Which of those two poor dumb bastards do you think God loved more?"

Will wrote about this some years later. He said that he got up from his chair and went to the window. He was crying, but he was laughing too. Crying and laughing. And he saw it all clearly for the first time. Saw his life and the things he believed for the first time in whole. Saw the love of God more broadly than he had ever imagined. Saw it clearly. He turned to P.D. and said, "Yes, we're all bastards, but you're the biggest bastard of all. Because I've been a minister all these years and now you've gone and made a Christian out of me." Campbell saw that God

did not love Thomas Coleman less than he loved Jonathan Daniels. Even as Coleman pulled the trigger. Even as he bragged about what he did. Even as a white segregationist bigoted Alabama jury acquitted him on all charges. And even as a grieving church in Keene, New Hampshire laid Jonathan in his grave. The three men remained in the motel room the rest of the day, drinking whiskey and holding a wake for their two fallen brothers -- Jonathan and Thomas. And out of that moment Will Campbell became committed to a radical form of Christian reconciliation. He has been called the “white Martin Luther King” and he has been called the “chaplain to the Ku Klux Klan.” These names have cost him many friendships, but he will leave not walk away from the Thomas Colemans of the world. This expansive, all-inclusive reconciliation has formed the heart of his ministry and witness to this day, and has inspired and shaped the religious spirits of countless others. I’m one of them.

There are people in America this week who are dead. The three killed by bomb blast. One just eight years old. The policeman sitting peaceably in his car. One of the terrorist brothers. My friend Nicky and his killer. There are many times that number in hospitals. The maimed and wounded from the marathon. Another policeman. The other brother, pulled from the boat where he had taken refuge. We will talk about who is bad and who is good. Who was innocent and who was guilty. What sheep were snatched from Jesus’ hand. We will look for reasons for these horrors and we may not find them. But I will put the hard, hard question that P.D. East asked Will before us now: Who of all these does God love most? Who least? That is not a rhetorical question. It is an urgent question. I wish I could jump quickly to the answer that Will Campbell came to, but in these first days after such heartbreak and horror I cannot. So I am in suspense. I am in suspense to find out if Jesus is my savior. I am in suspense to find out if he is the Messiah. I am in suspense because I believe that if we can answer that question we will resolve the struggle that took us to Baltimore. And will find out what a Christian response to violence looks like.

Many years later Will Campbell took the remaining two words that P.D. East offered him and drafted another definition of the Christian faith: “Grace trumps.” Grace: God’s love for all people, freely given to the undeserving, reconciles everything and everyone in himself through his Christ. God loves us when it would be smarter not to. He loves us when we don’t want him to and when we don’t love him. He loves us when he is the only one who will, and when the terrible things we do can’t deter him. This is a faith statement and I confess that I don’t always really believe that, but it’s what the Bible says, and it’s what Christ is Risen means, and it’s why we say Alleluia. And on the darkest of days, when all other words fail, it’s pretty good: *Alleluia. Christ is Risen. Amen.*