



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 14, 2020

The Violent Bear It Away

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 15, 2020

Matthew 11:11-17

Frank Morris owned a shoe shop in Ferriday, Louisiana - a small town in Concordia Parish where my father had grown up.

We had moved back to Concordia Parish in the summer of 1963, when my father became Superintendent of Education for the parish schools - we lived in Vidalia, across the Mississippi River from Natchez, Mississippi and just a few miles down the road was Ferriday.

Frank Morris was black, and in the early morning of December 10, 1964, his shop was torched, and so was Frank Morris, who had a bedroom in the back of his shop.

He died four days later, only saying that he saw two white men whom he thought were his friends, but never revealing their identity.

By all accounts, Frank Morris was respected by both blacks and whites, each comfortable enough to wait together inside his shop for their shoe repairs.

In 1964, maybe that breach of the racial barrier was reason enough for the Ku Klux Klan to act against Frank Morris.

That was the year of Freedom Summer as hundreds of young people rode buses into Mississippi to work for civil rights, and the Klan had announced they would retaliate, and three civil rights workers were killed in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

A year later, in the fall of 1965, two Federal Marshalls sat in our living room in our house in Vidalia.

Bloody Sunday in Selma was in the spring of that year. The Voting Rights Act had just been signed in August. Tensions had escalated in Concordia Parish as the school system was being sued to desegregate.

The Marshalls were in our living room because we were receiving phone calls...threats against my father, our family, if he let the schools integrate.

Because I had a deep voice, and when they asked for Mr. Lancaster and before I could finish saying 'just a minute, I'll get him for you' the verbal tirade would begin.

The Marshalls were talking to us about what to do if something was thrown through a window or burned in our yard.

My job was to get my baby sister. I was fifteen and she was two. She and my other sister each had a bedroom on the front of the house facing the street. My brother and I had our bedrooms across the hall from them, on the back of the house.

I was to get her, and then go back through my room and through the window into the back yard; making sure no one was there and go to the big ditch behind our house.

Nothing ever happened, except for the phone calls we continued to get and letters my father received, some cars that at night would drive by and around the corner and then come back by slowly.

No, something did happen. Because I'm white, I have had an escape plan from the violence of racial injustice that has been driving through my world for my entire life.

There was no escape plan for Frank Morris or George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, or Breonna Taylor.

The storms of the never-ending violence of racial injustice give way to a rising flood of fear that sweeps away the foundations of our lives, leaving shattered memories of hope and home and calls for justice for them and their families.

But history tells us it is more than these families, there are the families of nameless men and women and young people who have endured the relentless grief and inescapable pain of racial injustice.

Flannery O'Connor took the title of her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* from our text in the gospel of Matthew.

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force...

But to what,” said Jesus, “shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, ‘We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” (Mt. 11:12, 16-17)

Perhaps that's the best way of saying what some of us experience...The violent will pipe and expect us to dance to their tune.

So, we try to make sense of the violence; we wring our hands and shake our heads. And we seem to always come to the same conclusion: They are monsters.

As someone pointed out to me, “We ask questions like: How could he do such a thing? We need to be asking (she said): How is my complacency in a culture of violence resulting in the death of members of my community?”

It begins, as Walter Wink noted, “The roots of violence lie deep within us... (he says) “Every outer evil inevitably attracts from our own depths parts of ourselves that resemble it.”

If we resist violence with violence, we simply become what we resist...and what is required as a follower of Jesus is a spiritual act in the real world.

We cannot expect to be the salt of the earth and then do nothing to change the blandness of our belief that all is well with all God’s children.

We cannot be the light of the world and then do nothing to change the darkness that justifies our own power and privilege to remain content with things as they are.

I am helped here by the words of the late Egyptian President, Anwar el-Sadat, as he began his march to peace with Israel; very much a journey into a world beset by violence and enmity between two peoples.

In his autobiography, he wrote: *What was it then that I needed to change? We had been accustomed (a whole generation had been brought up to regard Israel as taboo...*

[So] he who cannot change the very fabric of his thought will never be able to change reality.

What is it that I need to change...First, to acknowledge the privilege I have to not be judged, questioned, or assaulted in any way because of the color of my skin.

For some this is more than difficult, and they would prefer to fight fire with fire, to dance to the tune of the violent bearing it away.

And then I need to turn the moral eye inward for it is true that we are all children of wrath.

When Jesus began his ministry, he read from the prophet Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because...He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."*

Some of us need deliverance from blindness because there are some who need deliverance from oppression, and we can no longer turn a blind eye to the institutional practices, the policies of injustice.

Elie Wiesel was right: *"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere...Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe."*

As Christians, we reach that center of the universe at the cross, where in the suffering Christ, God reconciled the whole world to himself.

Jesus' entire chosen life was his cross...what someone called "empowered vulnerability". It means the love that has been set free by God to choose freely, to take risks, to reach out...to give from a deep center that has been released from prisons of all kind, and knows exactly what needs to be done.

The prophet Micah said it clearly: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

I don't hear the words 'think about' or 'dream about'. As Christians, we are called to a way of life created for us in the cross in which we each have a part to play in the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ.

As Paul said, "All this is from God, who...has given us the ministry of reconciliation..."

Quaker scholar Douglas Steere said, "God is always revising our boundaries outward." In Jesus, God's healing love breaks through our barriers reaching out to everyone. The Spirit of Jesus in us keeps pushing, tearing down the walls we build in our societies and in our hearts.

It takes courage to stand up for justice when the whole world wants you to conform. It takes courage to hear and see the truth when the whole world would have you deaf and blind.

It takes courage to live the love that is at the heart of our mission as followers of Jesus Christ. It is not an option. I remember William Sloane Coffin asking the question to the

church: “Are you looking for a lifetime membership in the Bystanders Association?”

No, we are joined in faith to Jesus Christ who calls us, commands us to pick up our sisters, our brothers, so that we all may be saved from dancing to the tune of the violent who would bear it away.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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