

The Death of Dr. Tiller and the Rhetoric of Violence

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University Congregational Church

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Reading: Interfaith Ministries of Wichita – June 1, 2009

The Board of Interfaith Ministries (“IFM”) of Wichita, Kansas, expresses today its deep sadness over the murder of Dr. George Tiller this morning at his place of worship, Reformation Lutheran Church. We condemn this kind of violence anywhere, but especially in a place of worship. Our prayers are with the Tiller family, Reformation Lutheran, and this community as a whole. We also pray for the shooter. IFM is made up of people of faith in various religions who seek to carry out our common human mission to build inter-religious understanding, promote justice, relieve misery, and reconcile the estranged. We work together for peace and constructive dialogue, and so our hearts break today that disagreement over an issue had led someone to this act. We call all persons to let this horrible incident cause us all to reflect on how we can live together as the people of God, even though we may disagree on various issues, and work together to prevent such incidents in the future. We will continue to work towards religious understanding, and we pray that all of Wichita will join us in this effort.

I propose to take seriously this invitation to reflect on the murder of Dr. George Tiller and “how we can live together as a people of God, even though we may disagree on various issues, and work together to prevent such incidents in the future.” I have to confess that there is a part of me that is not only saddened by the murder of this courageous man, but also weary of responding to yet another incident of madness and bigotry. In just the past few years I have written sermons on the 2006 murders of Amish girls in their school house; the shooting of 33 students and faculty

at Virginia Tech in 2007; and the murders of two Unitarian Universalists at the Tennessee Valley UU church in 2008. In that incident, the killer, Jim David Adkisson, left a “manifesto” in his vehicle the morning of the shooting. In it he declared, “Do something for your country before you go. Go kill liberals.”¹ In all of these I have preached on forgiveness, understanding, and the courage to be faithful to our deepest values of justice and righteousness. I have preached and lectured on the myth of redemptive violence; led workshops on pacifism and just-war theory; and worked on a variety of peace and justice organizations in the communities where I have served. Like a lot of you I am weary of the tireless work. I am burdened by the continuing violence that sears our communities and even our churches.

When you know the work of a man like Dr. George Tiller; a man dedicated to the health of women; a physician uncompromising in the rights of women; when you see that Christian man gunned down in his own church because he lived by these values, you are tempted to cave in to pressure of violence. Let the world be damned! Let us retire to the swimming pool and a mocha frappuccino.

¹ Donald E. Skinner, “Knoxville Churches Honor Shooting Victims; Killer Pleads Guilty,” *UU World*; Summer 2009, Vol. XXIII, No. 2.

As refreshing as that might be, we all know that we cannot retreat. We cannot be silent because silence is always a conspirator with evil. We must be more than a beautiful New England church with a white steeple. It is not enough that University Congregational Church be “iconic” in the city of Wichita. It is the content of this building that finally matters; the character of our souls; and the values that we represent. So let us keep our eye on the prize of God’s full justice, including complete access to women’s health care and the unbridled rights of women to determine the use and care of their own bodies.

With respect to the death of Dr. Tiller I think there are two issues that we need to further explore. The first is the recoil from violence in the church. The second is the place of violent rhetoric within our own Christian tradition.

The idea that any person, regardless of their state of mind or political persuasion, would enter any house of worship and murder another human being is reprehensible. It is natural for us to assume that a church, or temple, or synagogue ought to be a place where we can find some “shelter from the stormy blast” of commercialism, conflict, chaos and confusion. We think of the church as a sanctuary from the heat of human passion and madness.

I am reminded of T. S. Eliot's play, "Murder in the Cathedral."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, is in the Cathedral, pursued by the four assassins of King Henry II. While Becket had been a loyal chancellor for the king, his allegiance shifted from the court to the Church as archbishop. Faithful priests urged Becket to flee the assassins and escape back to France. Hear their words:

Priests: Bar the door. Bar the door.
 The door is barred.
 We are safe. We are safe.
 The enemy may rage outside, he will tire
 In vain. They cannot break in.
 They dare not break in.
 They cannot break in. They have not the force.
 We are safe. We are safe.

Thomas: Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors!
 I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ,
 The sanctuary, turned into a fortress.
 The church shall protect her own, in her own way, not
 As oak and stone; stone and oak decay,
 Give no stay, but the Church shall endure.
 The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door!²

We are reminded of the very words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

² T. S. Eliot, "Murder in the Cathedral," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909 – 1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1971), p. 211.

for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matt. 5: 43 – 46a)

We so very much want to bar the door. But the gospel calls us to open the door and engage the forces of evil and violence. "The church shall be open, even to our enemies."

I do not believe that our homes, or schools, or clinics, or churches will finally be safe unless we are willing to meet the violent nature of our culture. By that I mean a society that fundamentally believes that we solve problems by the use of force. It is the oldest myth in human civilization. Salvation finally comes by violent means. Dr. Walter Wink calls this "the myth of redemptive violence." The theme ranges from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to modern political plans for "shock and awe" pre-emptive military action. We begin to open the doors of the church when we take the time to study and understand the real religion of our culture – the religion of violence, revenge, power, and punishment. We will never have constructive peace and dialogue if we do not grasp the hold that redemptive violence has on our government, our religion, and our entertainment industry.

Interfaith and inter-religious dialogue will continue to stumble over the same old problems of a Palestinian state, the recognition and security of Israel, nuclear power in Iran, jihad and the real teachings of the Koran until we have come to terms with the foundations of human violence. We can no longer hide behind history, with the excuses that problems in the middle east entered with the Hebrews into the promised land; or the Ishmael and Isaac stories; or the military victories and political decisions of 1948. Every one of these stories is a deeper reference to the human proclivity to domination and power – violence and forceful occupation.

The murder of Dr. Tiller is but an expression of the myth of redemptive violence. Portrayed as a “mass murderer” by groups like Operation Rescue, the execution of Dr. Tiller is a logical consequence of the myth of redemptive violence. Randall Terry, in response to Dr. Tiller’s death said, “Dr. Tiller was a mass murderer...he left this life with his hands drenched with the innocent blood of tens of thousands of babies that he murdered. Surely there will be a dreadful accounting for what he has done.”³ It takes little encouragement for the mentally and morally challenged to revert to vigilantism in response to the vitriol of men like

³ Nancy Gibbs, “Tiller’s Murder: The Logic of Extremism on Abortion,” *Time*; <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1902120,00.html>, downloaded June 6, 2009.

Randall Terry or Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka. The members of that hate group carry signs to various protests that read, “Thank God for Dead Soldiers,” “God Hates your Tears,” “God Hates Fags,” and sign that reads “God’s View” with the image of Uncle Sam in gun sights. At the funeral service of Dr. Tiller yesterday, one of their signs read, “God Sent the Killer.” And let there be no ambiguity from this pulpit: No! God did not send the killer!

There are 926 active hate groups in the United States, with eight of them in Kansas, representing anti-gay, Neo-Nazi – National Socialist Workers Party, Skinheads, and Ku Klux Klan organizations. There are 68 hate groups in the states that border Kansas.⁴ Those who subscribe to the myth of redemptive violence believe that they are part of “God’s Army;” that their cause is just and righteous; and that killing men like Dr. George Tiller is a justified mission.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that 52% of hate crimes are committed against people of color, 17% because of their religious belief, 16% because of their sexual identity, and 14% because of

⁴ “Hate Groups Map,” *The Southern Poverty Law Center*;
<http://www.splcenter.org/intl/map/hate.jsp#s=KS>, downloaded June 6, 2009

their ethnicity or national origin.⁵ Bluntly we are talking mostly about African-Americans, Jews, Muslims, and gays or lesbians. I know that the threat of violence, even the fear of violence, is not far from the awareness of many African-American, Jews, Muslims, gays and lesbians. I believe that Inter-Faith dialogue must articulate the deep sources of violence in our culture and identify the organizations and expressions of violence and hate in our communities. Peace will not come to Wichita or any other city with silence. Violence is not only an issue for law enforcement and the judicial system; forensic psychologists and sociologists; legislators and policy makers. Violence and its many proponents is fundamentally a religious issue because it raises the question of how are God's children going to be in relationship with one another. Can there be a deeper conversation for the inter-religious community to take up?

The education about and the conversation about violence must necessarily deal with the language of violence, hate, and revenge within the sacred scriptures of our various traditions. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, et al. must honestly confront the violence and the justification of violence on the part of heroic figures, tribes, and gods in their sacred

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Hate Crime Statistics 2007: Inside a National Scourge" (the latest reporting year); http://www.fbi.gov/page2/oct08/hatecrime_102708.html, downloaded June 6, 2009

writings. Christians must own the fact that the New Testament is replete with anti-Semitism. What is the role of blood sacrifice in our tradition and how do we come to terms with such stories as the contemplated sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham? The Christian tradition must confront squarely the doctrine of blood atonement and how God saves humanity by the death of Jesus. If we seriously believe that the “blood of the Lamb” is essential to the salvation of the world I think we have a credibility problem. In fact, I believe that such theology represents the co-option of Christianity by the myth of redemptive violence. We must further consider the use of hate language in our creeds and doctrines, religious education, preaching, and publications. Denominations in the Christian tradition that use the common lectionary for its Sunday readings are invited to filter those readings for the violence of their content and orientation.

When we find the language of hate and violence in our religious traditions we must name them. We cannot ignore them or pretend they are not there. We must identify them and make a determination of how we will appropriate them. Let them be a reminder to us of primitive *homo religious* and dim civilizations struggling to grow out of a vision of life clouded by fear, ignorance, and superstition. With clear and direct

language let us teach our children the path of maturity and growth that even our faith had to trod on its way to a vision of God that is full of wholeness and peace for all of God's people. The Christian tradition cannot equivocate on the teachings of Jesus regarding peacemaking and the expectations of disciples to love one another and open the doors of the church, even to our enemies.

The invitation to dialogue is not only a challenge of Inter-Faith Ministries of Wichita. It is also a challenge to this congregation. We cannot have dialogue if we – University Congregational Church – do not come to the table. We cannot promote peace in relative isolation. We have to attend meetings and serve on committees. We have to hold Inter-Faith Ministries to its invitation to work together for peace and constructive dialogue. I cannot do this for you, but I am willing to be a part of the process. And let me tell you what I am willing to do. First, I will share this sermon with the President of the IFM's board, the Rev. Dr. Cathy Northrup, minister of First Presbyterian Church; the Rev. Dr. Michael Gardner, Vice President and Senior Minister of the First United Methodist Church, and the Rev. Sam Muyskens, Executive Director of IFM. Further, I will attend the next annual meeting of IFM, which will be June 18th. I have had our Church Administrator notify our delegates and

invite them to join me at that meeting. We have given deep financial support to Inter-Faith Ministries of the last several years. Now we must give our presence, our voices, and our work for religious understanding and peace making. I urge to join with me and throw open the doors!

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