Love Your Neighbor

Deborah Lewis

The golf pro is getting work done at Starbucks. It's been raining for three days in this southern resort town known for temperate winters. Today it's 45 degrees. Eyes bracketed by crow's feet, set wide in his winter-sunburned face, squint at his laptop between calls rescheduling three days' worth of cancelled lessons.

The sloppy twentysomethings sharing the long table with center electrical outlets have doughy faces, new laptops, and Vitamin water. Occasionally one speaks gibberish about list views, headers, and tag events, and one of the others yanks out his earbuds. It's mostly the curly haired boy and he's loud, like he's trying to get all three to take out their earbuds, like he wants to impress anyone who can hear.

The golf pro has old-school Sony earphones, bigger than a Kindle, the kind you can't stuff in your pocket.

I didn't bring mine. I relish the relative silence, waiting for my friend.

We're in town for a conference. Coffee and conversation before the long day, campus ministers without nametags.

So it's not like we're wearing signs or anything, but five minutes into our conversation, the pierced boy sipping Frappuccino at the next table suddenly starts talking, wants to explain his single earpiece to us.

"I'm deaf in the other ear. That's what happens when you fall asleep next to an amp. There was a bunch of feedback when they cranked it up. The doctor said if it'd started full blast I'd have 100% loss in that ear. But it's 85%. Some stupid number like that."

So we listen.

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Emerging Theological Voices: The Wesley Connection

Emerging Methodist Voices

The Wesley Connection at Austin Seminary brought two scholar/pastors from the Methodist tradition into the theological conversation on campus. One is a professor who also serves as a pastor and one is a pastor who is writing his doctoral dissertation. Each invited us into his work-in-progress. We entered worlds of theological meaning-making to wrestle with tough, hard-to-hear questions that press on us from public life: How does the violence of war our country practices “preach”? How do we excavate the experience of recent and renowned violent deaths to uncover the fear beneath—and follow with the Spirit through the Cross to justice?

Dr. Gerald Liu and The Reverend Jay Williams gave the two inaugural lectures in the Emerging Methodist Voices event offered through the Wesley Connection.

Destructive Proclamations and Radicalized Responses

Gerald Liu

In the Catskill Mountains of New York in 1952, US composer John Cage debuted a piece of music called "4'33"" [four thirty-three] at an amphitheater that still exists to this day, Maverick Hall. Cage did not perform his work. In fact no one really did, at least not how we might expect. A pianist named David Tudor sat down at a piano on the stage. Tudor set his stopwatch to four minutes and thirty-three seconds. He opened the keyboard and closed the lid. He turned the pages of the score. He adjusted the bench upon which he was sitting. But he never played a note. Leaves rustled. Insects buzzed. Raindrops pattered. The crowd thought they were participating in a practical joke. They whispered and even jeered at the event. Yet the "silent" piece was making a monumental artistic argument—that music happens all around. Cage wanted to show that the sounds of the world are constantly

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a transgression beyond comprehension—“Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever good that might result?” Even when God is not summoned to legitimize the wide elimination of peoples and cultures, the violence of the United States cannot escape from being framed with theological articulation.

Because US violence finds inspiration in the language of God, and presumes theological stances of sovereignty in its use of force, the violence we practice preach-es. Therefore, it warrants close theological investigation. Especially for US Christians, any reluctance to examine theologically and directly the violence that shapes American civic identity and global diplomacy forgets two confounding teachings of Jesus. One is a commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39; the second of the greatest commandments). The other sounds like an impossible skill to learn: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44–5). Acknowledging acts of state and global violence with Christian sympathy or protesting them with calls for peace do not suffice. The teachings from Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves and to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us demand meticulous acts of mercy including acts of solidarity and outcry. But the teachings of Jesus also implore Christians to do more than stand with the victims and express outrage at their casualties. We must examine how it is that we have come to love selves formed by an evolution of US violence that shows no signs of decelerating in the new millennium.

I will not dare to answer exactly how we go about doing that except to recommend theological scrutiny as a means of figuring out what we should do. We begin by pondering how our acts of extreme violence have enabled us to become who we are, or, rather, how we have been permitted to become who we are in spite of those sins, and how historical, present day, and future proliferation of violence amounts to theological proclamation. Then, we begin to cultivate dispositions open to what “loving our neighbors as ourselves” and “loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us” entail. We admit that our military campaigns define the platitude on our currency that “In God we trust.” Then, we can with more political sophistication interpret and practice the commandment to love others as ourselves. When we can recognize that the very land in which we practice our faith is secured by defying the essential beliefs of Christianity, then we can imagine and inhabit the impossible task of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. This kind of theological introspection is crucial because today’s enemies of the United States also call upon God to inspire their attacks. They are like us. And if we know how to love ourselves then we should have no trouble extending the same mercy to them.

Consider the opening invocation, “In the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate ... In the name of God, of myself, and of my family ... I pray to you God to forgive me from all my sins, to allow me to glorify you in every possible
way.” The words at face value might describe our own sense of spiritual vocation. They are translated from Arabic instructions recovered from the luggage of Mohammed Atta.

Atta’s deeds showcase unfaltering faith, though a deeply flawed and vicious one. Atta, the only one of his group trained to fly a jet, boarded American Airlines Flight 11, scheduled from Boston to Los Angeles, with Abdul Aziz al Omari, Satam al Suqami, Wali al Shehri, and Waleed al Shehri. This is the same flight where emergency phone calls were made from flight attendants Betty Ong and Amy Sweeney. This is the same flight that struck the North Tower at 8:46:40 a.m., killing eighty-one passengers, nine flight attendants, two pilots, and an unknown number of people in the World Trade Center. In all, almost 3,000 people from ninety countries and 415 first responders died on September 11, 2001.

Each of the victims deserves to be individually named. Yet I want to bring our attention to the perpetrators. What I want to stress, in conversation with the analysis of the instructions by historian Bruce Lincoln found in Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11th (University of Chicago Press, 2003), is how the motives of the 9/11 terrorists were intensely and profoundly religious. Lincoln helps his readers see how sincere piety drives the viciousness of the 9/11 hijackers. They were proceeding with theological motivations, and the result is a theological proclamation of unbelievable scale.

Later, the set of instructions, which reads more like a manual of prayer, states “[b]less your body with some verses of the Qur’an [done by reading verses into one’s hands and then rubbing the hands over whatever is to be blessed], the luggage clothes, the knife, your personal effects, your ID, passport, and all your papers.” They and the material content of their mission require consecration from sacred text. Their victims would be sacrificial offerings to God, “[c]heck your weapon before you leave and long before you leave. (You must make your knife sharp and must not discomfort your animal during the slaughter.)” For Atta and the other terrorists, their actions transcended ethics. They performed a sacred duty of unimaginable proportion. In actuality, the United States had seen something like this before. One might call to mind Pearl Harbor, but for Lincoln, the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, were more like Hiroshima. Tuesday, September 11, 2001, “was a spectacular event where sign and use value came together and displayed power that was not only overwhelming and decisive, but unprecedented and incomparable. They wanted us to surrender and refashion our culture after that of the victors” (18). His parallel sounds sensational.

But the connection that Lincoln sees brings us back to the difficult recollection that we once annihilated an entire city with a bombing that displayed a national conviction that we were above the law of God. We engaged in spiritual evil that Father Siemes could scarcely comprehend. If we choose to take that despicable memory seriously, perhaps it will motivate us to see that the 9/11 hijackers and other terrorists who have followed their lead—the Tsarnaev brothers, members of the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab—are enemies whom Jesus has called us to love just as we have loved our violent selves. Those terrorists are persecutors for whom the Christ has directed us to pray just as we ought to pray for our sinful selves. Living into the teachings of Jesus means scrupulous studying of their horrific acts and not simply filtering our understanding of that viciousness through news agencies. Yes, we should theoretically interpret the footage of the twin towers from fourteen years ago and also study today’s broadcasts of barbarism in order to devise counter insurgencies of love, mercy, and hope. The extremist violence of today not only communicates political fury. It proclaims religious belief. People of faith must attend to what is being said with recognition of how much mercy has been extended over time to all of us so that we can radicalize redemptive engagement with “them.”