Sunday, January 21, 1973
THE CHRISTIAN AND VIOLENCE
Genesis 4:2-10; Ephesians 4:25-32

To his family and friends in Emporia, Kansas, he was known as Jimmy. Navy buddies in California, knew him better as Mark. Teachers and classmates at a vocational training program in New Orleans, knew him as a good student, pro-bably the best in the class. To his landlady, he was polite, shy, and punctual with his $12.00 a week rent.

Yet a little over a week ago, this young man held a large part of the city of New Orleans, in fear with a reign of terror and violence.

A few years ago, another young man in Texas, killed his wife and mother, then climbed to a high tower on the Austin campus with a whole artillery of weapons and killed fifteen persons in all, while wounding double that number. The killer was on the surface an all-American boy who had been an eagle scout, had married a girl who was the home-town beauty and had friends and a good social life.

Such stories, although not always with so many people being killed by one person, can be found every day in the news. We live in a climate of violence and increasingly so. It's one of the major problems we face as human beings and it's a cause for Christian concern because it touches all of us in one way or another.

Want to hear a chilling statistic? Guns have killed more people in the United States in this century than have died in all the wars it has fought since 1900. Between 1900 and now there have been more than 800,000 deaths by guns and most of these in a violent manner.

This is just one kind of violence. The fact is that violence in its many forms plus its related effects is even more serious than we may have thought.

What has this to do with the Christian faith? Last week I mentioned that a large part of the meaning of salvation as Christians understand it, is to have a healthy, whole-some society in addition to our individual and personal faith in God through Jesus Christ. God does not want us to do violence to our brothers and sisters in the human race. The message of the Bible is plain on this issue. Do not kill! Do not steal! Love your neighbor. If any person says he loves God and hates another human being, he is a liar! These are just some of the things the Bible has to say on the subject.

But some people will immediately say — "violence is as old as the human race." And that's probably true. We read this morning as our Old Testament lesson the story of Cain killing his brother Abel. It's the earliest story of violence and murder in the Bible. The problem is that even though violence has been a part of the human story since the beginning of time, it's increasing and particularly in America.

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised, for we have a kind of tradition of violence in our history. Beginning with the frontier days and even before that, many in this country have always thought that the best way to settle an issue or dispute was with violent action, preferably with a gun by shooting it out. Even now this is the message of many of the westerns and other programs we see on tele-vision. Last week here in Lincoln, one person suggested that the way

to get rid of so-called adult or pornographic bookstores is to throw a grenade and blow them up.

Of course, we like to excuse ourselves by distinguishing between good violence and bad violence. And this too has been part of our history. Many white people have believed that violence against blacks and American Indians is a good thing. Many of those interviewed following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination clearly betrayed the feeling that it was probably a good thing that he was shot.

We officially approve of search and destroy violence in the Vietnam war and the recent so-called “carpet” bombing received the nodding approval of many. It’s called “good violence.”

And we like to believe that capital punishment which is its own kind of violence will curb violence. After the New Orleans tragedy, many people said there should be a mandatory death penalty for killing police personnel. Do we actually believe that the existence of such a penalty would have deterred the man on the motel roof and countless others in similar situations? He wanted to die, he expected to die!! For him there was freedom in death. Studies of the persons who have committed most of the violent crimes show that the existence of the death penalty wouldn’t have any effect.

Putting our faith. in the death penalty is part of the same belie·£ that we can wipe out evil or violence by killing someone.

Another problem with violence in our time and part of the reason for its increase is that violence has been and still is often glorified. This is ·always one of the tragedies of war, no matter how just we might feel the war to be. We give medals and honors to those who kill the most. Heroes are rarely the peace-lovers! Violence may be more socially acceptable than we like to admit.

Not only is so-called “good” violence glorified, but even worse than that in our time, crime and gangsterism and the violence and lawlessness that go with it are often glorified. An article in the Saturday Review pointed out that crime does pay at the box office. It is a melancholy fact that far more of our nation’s hoodlums, gangsters and wild ones in general have been enshrined on film than our more worthy historical figures. Few indeed are the films built around philanthropists, pacifists, and peace lovers or scientific wonder-workers and other saviors of mankind. Rather from Billy the Kid to Jesse James, to Killinger, to the Godfather, a long line of anti-heroes has stalked the screen, guns in hand, blazing away.

The funny part is that while the Mafia picks the public’s pocket, the public is beating down doors to read and see how it’s being stolen blind. One ex-Mafia figure said he remembers sitting in a movie-house watching the Godfather and was surprised to see the audience actually cheering at times. “That shocked me,” he said. “You’d think that Don Corleone was the Lone Ranger, and the other mob were the bad guys. Every time a bad guy did something to hurt Corleone and his men, the people would shout: ‘That bum, Get the louse!’ I couldn’t believe it. Didn’t they under-stand that all the mobsters in the movie were vicious?”

So, we have the irony, that with one side of our mouths, we preach respect for law and order and with our films and other media we often glorify lawlessness and violence as part of the American way of life.

It might be an interesting project for some student of movie economics and folkways to add up the hundreds of millions spent by studios to illustrate historic crime and perhaps balance this with the sickly sums spent on portraying artists, statesmen, notable teachers, and other benefactors of society with which our history is also filled. But we are firr11ly crime and violence oriented because it is known that the public will buy violence and crime.

But there's more. According to statistics, the United States has the dubious distinction of being perhaps the most violent nation on earth. Our incidence of violence is probably unmatched anywhere. The statistics of a few years ago are as follows — one murder, forcible rape, or assault took every 2 and a half minutes, one robbery every five minutes, one burglary every 28 seconds, one larceny ($50 or more) every 45 seconds and one auto theft every minute.

All of this caused one person to say that you are probably safer practically anywhere out of this country than in it. France and Japan have murder rates less than a third of ours. Italy less than a fifth. England only a seventh and the Netherlands only about a sixteenth.

The important point is that not nearly all the shootings and killings involve professional killers, crooks, or their junior criminal counterparts. In fact, contrary to a fairly widespread popular belief, most murders are committed by persons who are generally law-abiding. FBI figures bear out the conclusion that if murders and other violence were left only to the hardened-hoodlum, our murder rate would immediately drop to only a fraction of what it is now.

The vast majority or at least 80% of the killings are committed by so-called average, normally law-abiding per- sons actually known to the victim — -friends, neighbors, even members of the same family. Almost one third of all murders occur within the family unit. And slightly more than half of these involve spouse killing spouse and 20% parents killing children. In most cases the murder weapon is a gun. A few years ago, bumper stickers appeared which said, "If we outlaw guns, only the outlaws will have guns." If I were to design a bumper sticker it would say, "It's not the outlaws who have guns who worry me, it's the in-laws." Violence unfortunately seems to be a part of the American way of life.

We seem to want to believe that violence and killing will solve our problems. Even on an international scale, many people believe that firepower is the only way to settle basic issues. And if we don't manage to settle it with a little power, we have to have more power. Listen to some actual statements of persons — one person said, "We could've won the war in Vietnam a long time ago." "How," he was asked. "Well, we simply take out all of North Vietnam. We bomb them to hell, and we bomb the dikes, and we starve them to death and that's the way to win." Then someone asked him about China. And he said, "Well, you bomb China to hell too."

Not only do we have actual violence, but verbal violence as well. And Jesus was against that too. People are cursed and degraded with violent language. In earlier time, American Indians were cursed as "savages," to ration-alize our slaughter of them. Slavery similarly cursed Blacks as inferior.

Listen sometime to the verbal violence all around us. Some years ago, before President Kennedy was shot, here are some of the things I overheard — "Every thoughtful American ought to hate Kennedy." The Kennedy's ought to be shot. "The Chief Justice of the supreme court ought to be hanged." And after Kennedy's death — "he got what was coming to him." These statements were not made by hardened criminals, but by patriotic, church-going citizens.

So, we have in this country a history of violence, a belief by many persons that violence is the way to solve problems, people who practice both good and bad violence are glorified as heroes in movies and on TV, and now added to all of this we have an increase of anonymity which leads to more aggression.

In larger metropolitan areas where people feel unknown and lost, crimes of violence increase to a spectacular degree. Furthermore, as the population of a United States city increases the number of crimes per 100,000 persons consistently increases. Consider the crime of assault. In cities with less than 10,000 population the average is 29 assaults per ·100,000 people. In cities of 100,000 to 250,000, the assault rate is 83 per 100,000 persons and in cities over 250,000 the assault rate is 154 assaults per 100,000 per- sons.

The more we lose our sense of identity and community, the more that violence of one kind or another occurs.

Lack of faith and belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings is another source of violence. Louis S.B. Leakey the anthropologists some years ago said he selected L at random 1 a sample of dossiers of people who had committed violence. Out of 100 random files he was allowed to see, only three individuals admitted to any faith. If a person thinks that human beings are just body, hair, skin, flesh, and nothing more, then obviously if I snuff you out today instead of letting you go on, it doesn't matter. But if you believe that a human being is something worthwhile, you don't snuff him out. Similarly, a misguided faith is as destructive as no faith. For example, if you believe that somehow you are superior to someone else, you may also believe that you have the right to snuff him out or torture him. This is the basis of all racism and always leads to violence.

What then are some of the things we as Christians can do?

First. we need to recognize that the era of territoria1 conquests, colonial empires and military splendor is over. Wars have become too expensive-to wage and victories too futile to aspire to. The great violent upheavals of the past have become obsolete. The cemeteries are full of Napoleons, Caesars, and Alexanders who believed they were indispensable. We live in a time where there is no room for violent heroes, wars, and triumphant marches.

Furthermore, we have to break the glorification of violence. It is much easier to destroy than to build; one gunman can blow up an airplane and murder hundreds of people; a child can set a house on fire erected with the sweat and toil by working people. Destruction and violence give one the illusion of power. It is quite easy to feed this illusion by glorification of violence. It is easier to learn to be a murderer than a peacemaker — yet Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God," and he wasn't talking about peacemakers who use the methods of violence to try to bring peace.

Secondly, we've got to watch our own language of verbal violence and the degrading of other human beings. Our scripture lesson from the New Testament put it this way-- "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you."

Thirdly, we got to build communities, neighborhoods and overcome the terrible anonymity that leads to aggression and violence. Again, Louis S.B. Leakey, the anthropologist said, "I would

encourage more and more mixing of people from different backgrounds and races until mankind realizes that we are all one and the same. We think differently, our colors may vary, our hair may be different, but never-theless we are all men and women — human beings. As soon as people of different races and backgrounds start mixing, they begin to find so much in common with each other that the other things that are different fall apart.

May God help us all to see the human being in other persons, and to live humanly in the middle of chaos so that we can confront the noise and verbiage and falsehood of violence with the truth and power of the Word of God. Amen.