Sunday, July 27, 2003
YOU CAN'T LIMIT GOD'S GRACE
Genesis 1:26-27; John 1:1-5

A question that continually puzzles me, and I'm sure puzzles you, is: why do human beings torture and kill other human beings as if they were worthless? This question was brought home to me most forcefully again when my wife and I were with the choir on its recent concert tour of Eastern Europe and we visited the site of the Auschwitz Death Camp near Krakow, Poland.

We saw the torture chambers, the cremation ovens where bodies were burned, and other remnants of that awful period in history. We saw photographs of children, women, and men who were being tortured, starved to death, and shot. In memory of those millions of people who were killed, the choir sang several anthems while they stood next to the wall where people had been shot by the thousands. Then we made a circle, all of us — choir members and those traveling with them — joined hands, and prayed together. This was followed by the choir singing a benediction, "The Lord Bless You and Keep You."

The history of the human race is filled with people enslaving, torturing, and killing one another. The time of slavery and the segregation following it in the United States are examples in our own history. Our treatment of the Native Americans is another example.

Unfortunately, a lot of the mistreatment and killing that has taken place within the human species has been done in the name of religion. That's what I am going to deal with in this sermon.

A new book I have been reading, and which some of you have read, has the title: Is Religion Killing Us? The subtitle is Violence in the Bible and the Quran. The author is Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer. It's a revealing study.

The author acknowledges that the problem of violence is much larger than the religiously sanctioned violence described in the Bible and Quran. Bad religion is not the only cause of violence. He also acknowledges that these "sacred texts" have many positive themes in them. However, his thesis is that they are also filled with "violence-of-God" traditions and teachings. He demonstrates in his book that there are numerous and varied portrayals of God as punishing and violent. God's power is frequently described as being coercive and abusive. These are some of the dominant themes in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Therefore, he argues, throughout history human beings have justified their violence because God is violent and approves of violence.

A second thesis in his book is that the widespread acceptance of "violence-of-God traditions" solidifies the relationship between violence and the divine so completely that, functionally, the worship of violence is the real religion in much of the world today. Too many people believe in salvation through violence — that violence will save us. Hitler named his killing of the Jews, "The Final Solution." It was based on the assumption that if all or enough Jews were killed, Germany's problems, and the problems of many other nations, would be solved forever. It was salvation through violence. So maybe you shouldn't be surprised that many of the people who did the killing in the Holocaust considered themselves devout Christians.

Many churches in this country justified slavery based on passages from the Bible. In Christian history, heretics were tortured and burned at the stake in the name of God.

The belief that violence is the answer is still widespread. The other day, on one of those talk radio programs where the host is continually saying that the public education system in the United States is a total failure, one caller had the solution. He claimed it was all because teachers can no longer paddle students. He was saying in his own way, violence will save us.

Fortunately, there is another side to the Christian way. The same is true of Judaism and Islam. Jesus constantly called into question the "violence of God" traditions in the Hebrew scriptures. He also would not allow those following him to use violence when they were tempted to do so against those who opposed him. When some people in Samaria did not want Jesus and his disciples to come through their territory, the disciples wanted to call down God's wrath and have them killed, but Jesus wouldn't allow it.

Over and over again, he said to those who wanted to follow his way rather than the way of violence, "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you." Here are a few examples of his teachings that I have paraphrased into today's language. "You have been told, obey God, and it will rain and the harvest will be plentiful; disobey God, and your crops will fail. But I say to you, God is not like that. God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." In other words, God is not violent, punishing, and vindictive.

"You have been told that God wants you to kill those who curse father or mother and to kill rebellious children. But I say to you, God isn't like that. God wants you to challenge oppressive power whenever you see it and to deal with it as non-violently as possible."

"You have been taught that those who break the Sabbath laws and other commandments will bring God's wrath on the nation, thus such religious lawbreakers should be killed. But I say to you, God is not like that. God is not violent and punishing. God does not kill people, and God does not want you to kill people."

"You have been taught that God is God because of God's superior violence and that salvation means defeat of enemies. But I say to you, based on my experience of God, that those who use violence will perish by violence." Jesus constantly called into question the "violence of God" traditions and teachings.

In addition to the "violence of God" traditions in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, another religious reason human beings treat other human beings so shamefully is because of the false assumption that God loves some people more than others. Another way of stating this premise is that in the past and in the present, there are those who declare they have a preferred relationship with God that is not available to others unless those others have exactly the same beliefs.

You might remember a statement made a few years ago by a prominent Christian minister. He announced that "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." Other Christian leaders are continually saying that God does not hear the prayer of a Muslim. There are Christian leaders who say that God does not hear the prayer of others who claim to be Christian because they do not have the correct beliefs.

What is it in human nature that causes people to want to try to limit or control the love of God and the grace of God? What is the benefit to you in believing that God is going to send some people into eternal punishment unless they believe exactly what you believe? The only benefit

I can think of is that you might not want to spend eternity with certain people you dislike or who do not agree with you.

I've always loved this little poem:

I dreamt death came the other night,
And heaven's gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright,
Ushered me inside.
And there to my astonishment
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth,
And spiritually disabled.
Indignant words rose to my lips
But never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise —
Not one expected me.

From almost the very beginning of the Christian movement, there has been a disagreement over how inclusive or exclusive God's grace is. There have always been those who want to limit God's grace. A very helpful new book on this subject is one I've been reading this summer. Its title is Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas by Elaine Pagels. She is a biblical scholar who teaches at Princeton University. In her new book, she compares some of the basic teachings of the Gospel of Thomas with the Gospel of John.

In a decision made by the Council of Nicea in the year 325, the Gospel of Thomas did not make it into the list of approved books that now comprise what you call the New Testament, and the Gospel of John did. She traces the historical, political, and theological reasons for the rejection of the Gospel of Thomas and the inclusion of the Gospel of John.

According to Pagels, the Gospel of Thomas is more inclusive, while the Gospel of John is more exclusive. According to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus came among us to show us that the "light of God" is within all human beings. We are all daughters and sons of God. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the only Son of God. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the only one with the divine light, whereas in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus came to tell and show us how each person should also seek the light within and can find the light within.

Her book demonstrates that the early Christian movement was much richer and more complex than most people realize, and she believes the Christian faith lost some of its power because of trying to narrow its doctrine. The Christian religion, she believes, is not primarily a set of beliefs. Its basic purpose is to help you experience a relationship with the divine and the sacred. Such a relationship always transcends sets of doctrines.

Jesus was a teacher of reverence, not the author of new creeds and doctrines. He was a means to an end, not an end unto himself. He taught his followers to live the love of God in the way they related to others, especially those who were considered inferior, outcast, or beyond the grace of God. Unfortunately, there were some in the early church who taught that what you believe about Jesus was the essence of the Christian way. They formulated the orthodox creeds of the church. Then lines were drawn to divide believers from unbelievers, and the rest is history, much of it bloody.

What does all this have to do with the question I posed at the beginning of this sermon? Why do human beings torture and kill other human beings as if they were worthless? One answer is to be found in the “violence of God” traditions and teachings. A second answer is to be found in the mistaken belief that God loves some people more than others — that God’s grace is limited to those with the correct beliefs. God’s enemies can then become your enemies.

The corrective is to be found in the assertion stated in the first creation story in the book of Genesis: “God made all human beings in God’s image.” The implications of this simple statement are profound. It implies that all human beings, no matter where they live, when they were born, what their sexual orientation is, what they believe, what the color of their skin is, what their intelligence is, what their handicaps are, what their ethnic background is, what their religion is — are human beings and are children of God, and therefore all of us are sisters and brothers to each other. God has no favorites.

This is underscored time and time again in the teachings of Jesus and in other books of the New Testament. In the first letter of John, it is written: “Those who say they love God and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” Another way of stating it is: the way you treat people is the way you treat God. Your primary obligation to other human beings is to be compassionate as God is compassionate, “to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.” “You are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Jesus said over and over, “You cannot limit God’s grace. You can only accept it and experience it.” You cannot do anything to earn God’s grace. It is freely given. You are beloved of God simply because you exist. God loves you and each and every human being because God is love. Meister Eckhart put it bluntly when he said that he never thanked God for loving him because God cannot help it. It is God’s nature to love.

If “exclusive” is the ugliest word in the English language, then “grace” is the most beautiful word. Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and that includes all of us. Amen.