

Murderers

Matthew 23:29-39

March 23, 2014

Sure, I'll admit to being a hypocrite, but a murderer?

In the two hundred years between 1095 and 1291, Christians went to war to reclaim access to important religious sites in Palestine, the Holy Land, in a series of military campaigns, known collectively as the Crusades. The word "crusade" is derived from the emblem which they wore and under which they fought -- a cross. Under the banner of the cross, in the name of Jesus, European Christians pursued wars that resulted in the deaths of between one and three million people.

In the twelve years between 1933 and 1945, under the auspices of the Third Reich, German people, many of them Christians urged on by religious zealotry, participated in the systematic persecution and annihilation of ethnic Jews. Before this holocaust was brought to an end by the victory of the Allied Forces, six million Jews were murdered, a full two-thirds of the Jewish population in Europe. And if others targeted by the Nazi holocaust are included -- Romanis, homosexuals, people with disabilities -- the number murdered grows to ten to eleven million people.

Closer to home, and closer to our own time, the slave trade, the forcible commodification of human beings, directly caused the deaths of between thirty and sixty million Africans. Some have called slavery our nation's original sin, and the dark shadow and far-reaching effects of this sin, so vigorously defended by many Christian preachers and believers, still haunt us.

In 1993, David Stannard published a book cataloguing the impact of the settlement and annexation of the Americas, including our homeland. He titled the book, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, arguing that "the European and white American destruction of the native peoples of the Americas was the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world." How massive? Not six million murdered, not eleven million, but as many as one hundred million native people exterminated in the four hundred years between 1490 and 1890. And Stannard lays the ideological blame for these mass murders at the feet of ... Christians.

But it wasn't me. I haven't killed anybody. And if I had lived during the time of the crusades or during the early days of our nation, I wouldn't have done what they did. I wouldn't have killed Moslems in the name of Jesus. I wouldn't have killed Africans in the name of Jesus. I wouldn't have killed native Americans in the name of Jesus.

Does my protest sound familiar?

How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You make fine tombs for the prophets and decorate the monuments of those who lived good lives; and you claim that if you had lived during the time of your ancestors, you would not have done what they did.

I doubt that any of religious leaders Jesus was addressing had ever personally killed anybody, either, but Jesus holds them responsible. They are communally responsible, because as a people, while they honor prophets long dead, they continue to harass and reject and abuse and, yes, some of them even kill the prophets and teachers and wise ones sent by God to warn them in their own day.

And so we too build Holocaust Museums and monuments to Sitting Bull and Martin Luther King, but has anything changed? Is it true that we would not do what they did? Have we repented of the sins of our own ancestors, the guilt of which we too must be absolved? Do we welcome and listen to those who come in the name of the Lord to warn us in our own day?

Jesus insists that in the Jerusalem of his day, nothing has changed. The people of God are doing still what they have always done, reject and kill God's messengers, from A to Z -- from Abel to Zechariah, from beginning to end -- from Abel's story in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, to Zechariah's story in 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Hebrew Bible.

So the beat goes on. But how? How is it that God's people become killers? How is it that followers of Jesus can create a culture which justifies murder?

It starts, I think, in 313 AD with the so-called "Edict of Milan," the agreement between two Roman emperors, Constantine and Licinius, to grant religious freedom to Christians. In short order, our Christian ancestors under Roman rule went from being a persecuted minority to a tolerated cultural sub-group and then to being part of the officially established religion of the empire.

We were recognized. We were endorsed. We got power. But you know what they say about power ...

When you have something, you want to hold on to it. When you have power, you want to protect it. And how do powerful institutions, powerful peoples, powerful nations hold on to power? By violence. Isn't it true? Borders must be protected. Resources must be guarded. Threats must be contained. Any opposition must be pacified, kept out, put down.

And the larger and more powerful any institution, any people, any nation gets, the more need it has to resort to violence to maintain itself or to aggrandize itself. The bigger it gets, the bigger stick it needs.

And so a church -- a church of Jesus Christ! -- a church that finds itself now with influence, in power, in control resorts, too, to violence. Before long, Christians are razing pagan temples and putting pagan priests to death, burning heretics at the stake, hanging witches, making forcible conversions, engaging in "holy" wars, purging Jews, uprooting people from their lands, taking from them their livelihoods and their lives with impunity, driven by some sense of manifest destiny.

Soren Kierkegaard said: "Better well hung, than ill wed." And the wedding of church and state is a very bad marriage. The separation of church and state is not just about protecting government from religion, it's about protecting religion from government. When our sense of identity and purpose as people of God is too closely tied to our sense of identity and purpose as citizens, we lose our way! Because government, any government, keeps the peace by force, of one sort or another, but the people of God do not. The people of God must not!

Our way is the way of Jesus.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

How Jesus loves Jerusalem! How Jesus loves even this Jerusalem that kills the prophets and stones the messengers God has sent them.

How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

But they would not let him. What did they do with this one who came to them in the name of the Lord, wanting to embrace them? They killed him!

He is the prophet sent by God to warn them! He is the teacher sent by God to guide them! He is the wise man sent by God to show them the way, to tell them the truth, to bring them life! And they killed him!

This is why Matthew puts this speech here, isn't it? This is what Jesus is talking about, isn't it? Jesus is talking to them about what they, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, and all the people of Jerusalem itself, are about to do to him.

But if we had been there, we wouldn't have done it, right? Instead, we build fine tombs, for Jesus ... and we call them churches.

Our way is the way of Jesus. Our way must be the way of Jesus! We do not come together to remember and honor a dead teacher. We come together to follow a living Lord!

Our way must be the way of Jesus. And what way does our Lord take? What way did he take when he came to Jerusalem, when they rejected his open arms, and conspired instead to have him arrested and put to death? For God loved the world so much that God sent us his Son ... to purge the world of God's enemies!

No. God loved the world so much that God sent us his Son to offer his life to save ours. This is the way Jesus takes: the way of the servant, the way of sacrifice, the way of self-giving, the way of offering himself, all of himself, for the sake of the world. This is the way Jesus makes peace

And if we will be followers of Jesus, this is the way we will make peace: not by defending our rights and protecting our gains, not by force of any kind, but by offering ourselves.