

May 24, 2009

Acts 1:1-11

1 John 5:6-13

“Written in Red”

Television entered my home when I was five years old. I actually wasn't too interested in many of the programs. My brother and I enjoyed the large box more than the TV, I think. We made it into a hideout.

From my childhood through my early adult years, television news was pretty tame. Actually, it could be boring—less than photogenic men droning on and on endlessly.

Then, around the time I entered seminary in the 80's, the news began to change. The mood of delivery became urgent, passionate. The longer segments dealt with violence in the news. I heard the infamous phrase, “If it bleeds, it leads”. Over the years the news became more and more grisly and graphic. Watching 24 hour news stations like CNN can be dangerous for children. Kids watch films of hurricanes, of tornadoes, of homes being swept away, of cars tossed like miniature toys. They hear of murders, see photos of young kids' faces accompanying video of weeping family and friends placing teddy bears on sidewalk memorials for murdered children. They worry about their own safety and have trouble sleeping at night.

Our world is saturated in blood. We remember history lessons about ancient Roman coliseum spectacles where gladiators fought to the death, and animals devoured Christians. We look back and think, “What brutal, barbaric, violent times!” But our “entertainment”, both fictitious and documentary, involves more and more violence and disturbing human interactions.

The history channel recently did a series on gangs- and depicted how American gangs are now connected to Mexican gangs and have spread into Canada. Because of gang life, there are children in our cities who have seen as much blood spilled as our troops in the Middle East.

These gangs are blood based and even use “blood” in their names. Gang members see themselves as blood brothers and blood sisters. It can be hard for us to understand the ruthless actions of gangs—and even more, to understand the deep loyalty and commitment members feel toward their

gang community. It is a strange connection between “love” and “blood” that holds gangs together so fiercely.

The world, of course, is always filled with violence. The world bleeds all over- and that blood spills into our personal lives- sometimes through accounts and visual images via TV, newspapers, videos and films—and sometimes through personal losses and experiences resulting from gang shootings, school shootings, drunk driving.

On this Memorial Day weekend we remember loved ones who have died, and we honor those who have died serving our country. We feel love and pride for them—but our hearts ache that lives are lost again and again and again throughout history.

Belonging to the church, being a person of faith does not inoculate us against violence, death, suffering.

In Dadeville, Alabama, two men got into a Bible quoting contest outside one of their apartments in the summer of 1996. Gabel Taylor, 38, the brother of a preacher, got into a shouting match with another Dadeville resident as to who knew the most Scripture. They began fighting over one particular passage, and the man who lost the contest went into his house, got his gun, shot Taylor in the face and killed him. Knowing your Bible isn't enough, is it?

Just reflecting briefly over the past 22 years of my ministry I remember violent tragedies that touched my congregations:

A young woman raped in a Hardee's parking lot after she returned to her car following a quick breakfast on her way to work;

A boyfriend of an 8th grader in our church's youth group accidentally killed by his friend as they goofed around with a shotgun in the boy's home;

A high schooler, tormented by a girlfriend's rejection, shot and killed her parents, the parents of a boy on the soccer team coached by my husband;

A father, whose entire family was killed as they drove home from a day at Great America—he lost his wife, three children and the family dog when they were hit head-on by a drunk driver;

And we remember Ryanne Mace, Beth and Jim Best's niece, who was killed in the shooting at Northern Illinois University a little over a year ago.

I recently read in the Chicago Tribune that 27 of the Chicago children murdered in the past year lived within an 8 mile radius of President Barack Obama's Hyde Park home.

In a world of such violence, it's ironic that over the past several decades the church has chosen to reject its heritage of blood imagery. The Rev. Leonard Sweet, writing in *Homiletics* magazine reports that in the 90's the United Church of Christ denomination published a new hymnal which deleted a multitude of references to Jesus' blood from a host of old familiar hymns. Hymns like *Nothing But the Blood, There is a Fountain Filled with Blood* were dropped, and language was changed in hymns like *The Old Rugged Cross*: verse 3 was changed from *stained with blood so divine* to *which bore love so divine*. Verse 2 of *Oh, How I love Jesus* was changed from *It tells me of his precious blood, the sinners perfect plea* to *Whatever problems may befall, we'll live in dignity*.

Now, we shouldn't just pick on the United Church of Christ. These changes are taking place in many denominations. Even though OUR hymnal still has some "blood-soaked" songs, we don't actually sing them so much. For a long time now the church has sent the message that all that blood-stuff is gross, disgusting, maudlin and messy. I, myself, have never been a fan of the "blood" hymns. I have a clergy friend from seminary who won't go near them.

But I'm seeing a need to take another look at this whole issue. Remember how the UCC hymnal changed the rugged cross from being stained with BLOOD to bearing divine LOVE? That connection is actually powerful—but we need BOTH the BLOOD and the LOVE messages, because Christ's shedding of his blood reveals the lengths to which he was willing to go, out of love for us. That connection is crucial. And it seems, although in tragically destructive ways, the gangs understand that. The members are willing to suffer, to shed blood, to do time, to protect one another.

In African American churches the songs about Christ's blood are sung much more often than in white churches. To those caught in the world's deepest

troubles, to the residents of our most violent neighborhoods, our most hopeless situations, the church's message is needed:

Christ knows about blood.
Christ knows about death.
Christ knows about violence.
But Christ knows no defeat.

1 John 5:6-13 clearly portrays the messier moments that make up God's redeeming work through Christ. 1 John states that there are three witnesses to the truth about Jesus: the water, the blood and the Spirit. It takes the water of baptism, the blood of the cross and the wind of the Spirit to open the door to abundant and eternal life. Salvation was not accomplished through a bloodless coup. God's testimony of love is written in red.

In some Bibles, Jesus' words are printed in red, helping us zero in on his teaching and preaching. But the most important RED in the story of Christ is his literal and physical shedding of his life's blood for us.

A contemporary song puts it well; "Written in Red" by Gordon Jensen:

*In letters of crimson, God wrote his love
On a hillside so long, long ago.
For you and for me, Jesus died,
And love's greatest story was told.*

*I love you, I love you.
That's what Calvary said.
I love you, I love you,
Written in red.*

Jesus' love for you and for me and for the world is "written in red". The Risen Christ has offered us his "loveblood". Can those in need feel the touch of Jesus' nail scarred hands through us?

Receive the life transforming news of the amazing depth of Christ's love and sacrifice for YOU. Then, as we say when we baptize children here, "offer yourself as the instrument of that love" in the lives of those needing Christ's good news both nearby and around the world. AMEN.