Becoming…Sermon Series
3 - From God of Violence to God of Love
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For the first time in several years, Crestwood has a men's basketball league. Each Sunday afternoon, a bunch of us gather for fun and fellowship and doing our best Rex Chapman impressions (kids, ask your parents who Rex Chapman is). But I've noticed something interesting the last few weeks. A person's demeanor changes when they cross that line onto the court and the game starts. Guys who are super-nice off the court take on a different persona. For instance, last week one guy was throwing elbows, shoving other players, and even cursed at the refs. Granted, it was me, but the guy completely missed a foul call. It really brought home to me that, for many of us, the idea of competition and an "us vs. them" mentality is a part of our DNA. Has that spilled over into our faith, as well?

For this sermon series, we're looking at the way we're becoming better followers of Christ. What steps are we taking on our spiritual journeys to be more faithful, more connected to God? So far, we've talked about moving from believing to belonging, from being organized to being organizing, and from being judgmental to being gracious. You can find all those sermons on our website.

Today, we're looking at moving from a God of violence to a God of love. Now, you could make the argument that we are already there. No one is posting on Facebook that God should smite a certain group of people or calling for God to rain down fire and brimstone on whatever team the Wildcats are playing this week. We might think that a God of violence is so Old Testament, and that we've moved way beyond that in our cultured, developed society. Have we? Or does that mindset still exist?

Let's get to know that God again, shall we? While the God of the Old Testament exhibits much grace and creativity and compassion, that God is mostly know for tendencies toward violence, vengeance, and judgment. One of the best know examples is the story of Noah's Ark. If we dig a bit deeper into that story, once we get past the fuzzy bunnies hopping onto the ark, we realize that God killed everyone by Noah and his family in the flood for their disobedience. Makes you think twice about making change in the offering plate, doesn't it?

That disturbing behavior from God continued once the people had God's law to follow. Take, for example, the different offenses in the Old Testament that are worthy of a penalty of death. For example, worshipping other gods was punishable by death. Should that be punishable by death? No! Should you enforce the death penalty on someone who worked on the sabbath? No! How about someone who committed adultery? No! What about a rebellious child? (Pause) No! But that's what God calls for in the Hebrew scriptures.

The image of a violent God doesn't end there. In Deuteronomy, God calls for the Israelites to invade the surrounding towns and to annihilate every person who lived there. And if you think that's bad, here's one that's even worse. King David wanted to do a census, so he does it, but without consulting God first. God gets angry and sends a pestilence on Israel. Seventy thousand people die. As it reads in the Bible, God kills 70,000 of God's own people because God was angry that David took a census. Are you rethinking signing the attendance pad earlier? Did you consult God first?

How do we make sense of this portrayal of God? For me, I chose not to believe those scriptures. I don't believe God commanded the Israelites to kill all those people. I just don't.

That's not the God I worship or have come to know through Jesus Christ. I actually think this passage tells us more about the people writing it than it does about God. The Israelites existed in a tribal culture, in which taking land and defeating enemies with the blessings of the gods was commonplace. If you won a battle, it was God's will. If you lost a battle, you were being punished by God. If the flu broke out in your tribe and a bunch of people died, then you must have somehow angered God to cause this punishment.

Back in the days before medicine and science and meteorology, God got the credit for good things and the blame for bad things. I don't believe God commanded the Israelites to do those things. And I also don't believe God killed people for David taking a census. I believe a disease swept through the Israelites, and the only way they knew to explain it was God's wrath. The authors of the Bible wrote what they knew, and so they portrayed God as a warrior who led them into battle and punished them when they did wrong. I'm sure if we were writing the story of God today, we'd do it much differently.

Or would we? We'd like to think that our culture has purged itself of this "God Of violence" perspective, but I'd argue it's more prevalent than we want to admit, and it shows up most in the "us vs. them" mentality that dominates how we relate to people and cultures different than us. I experienced this while living in Chicago. I was riding the subway one day and was eavesdropping on a group of guys who were discussing the two local baseball teams, the Cubs and the White Sox. They were each saying which team they liked and why. When it got to one of the guys, he said, "I actually root for both teams." His friends almost enacted the death penalty right there. "You can't root for both teams! You have to pick one or the other or else you're a traitor!" Thankfully, nothing like that happens with college basketball teams around here.

There is still a prevailing sense in our society that if you are not for us, you are against us, even if you're not really against us. We have to be willing to admit that Christians have used that mandate down through the centuries to commit heinous acts of violence against other people. The Crusades, the oppression of Native Americans, and the Holocaust all had deep roots in a warped mindset of Christian superiority, that you if weren't for us, then you were against us. I love being a Christian, but I understand why some folks in the world hate Christians. We have to be willing to name that the God of violence still lives. We have to be willing to own our complicity in the wars and violence that have taken place in the past. As Brian McLaren writes, "The less aware Christians are of how dangerous Christianity has been, the more dangerous Christianity will be."

Where the ice gets decidedly thinner is when we link our faith and our country so closely that our patriotism, which is love of your country, turns to nationalism, which is the belief that your country is better than all the other countries. Before you accuse me of being a flag-burning infidel, let me say I love America, and I do believe it is the greatest country in the world. But I also believe there are other great countries filled with great people, and just because I love America doesn't mean I have to hate some other place, even if they choose to hate me.

This is how the tribalism of the Old Testament is still alive today. Back then, the Israelites would conquer a nation, kill their people, and take their land because they believe God called them to do that. Doesn't mean that's what God did, but that's how they interpreted their victory. "We went to war and won, so God must have ordained it." So God got a lot of credit for commissioning violence that I believe God never called for in the first place. That was simply how the tribal culture operated.

Fast-forward to today. If we believe we are the best country in the world, and we believe God blesses us over and above any other country, then it's not a big leap to claiming a divine

mandate for asserting our supremacy over others. The more this is perpetuated at the national level, the more it trickles down to the interpersonal level, and suddenly everyone who is from one of those other countries is a potential enemy.

I've told you all that in Chicago I frequented a local 7-11 for my beloved Slurpees. The store was owned and run by a Muslim man who always wore his turban and robe. I went into the store a few days after 9-11 happened. The owner was wearing a baseball cap, T-shirt, and jeans, looking as un-Muslim as possible. When I asked him how he was doing, the frightened look in his eyes was haunting. At a time when our nationalism had been dialed up to the extreme, he was experiencing in a new and frightening way what it felt like to be a "them."

As cultured and sophisticated as we would like to think of ourselves, we have to admit our violent impulse is still alive today. I've seen it on the basketball court, I've seen in Sandy Hook and Las Vegas and countless other cities, and we saw it this past week with the school shooting in Marshall County. As human beings, we still believe a primary to work out our differences is by strapping on the gloves or loading a gun, and in our world today we have way too many means at our disposal to enact violence, from easily accessible guns to nuclear weapons. At some point, we have to stop making it easier to kill each other.

So how do we move from the God of violence to the God of love? Well, Jesus. That's always a good answer, right? The coming of Jesus Christ brought to us a new understanding of grace and love we've never seen before, and it replaced any notion of God as vengeful or violent. But here's the problem: When it comes to "the enemy," we live like we conveniently forgot that Christ ever existed. We revert back to an "us vs. them" mentality, with God blessing us over and against anyone who's not like us. The irony is that we become obsessed with winning, when we worshipped a savior who very clearly lost, being crucified like a common criminal.

McLaren says we need to evolve our understanding of a gracious, expansive God from "the God of us" to "the God of all of us." Yes, God blesses us. But God blesses others, too, not in ways that favors one person or group or nation over another, but in ways that affirms the value of all people and groups and nations. Because when you get right down to it, no matter to whom you pray, 99.9% of us are good people just trying to do the best we can. By seeing God this way, we are not demoting God to a weaker, lower level. Instead, we are rising to a higher and deeper understanding of God. That's feels counterintuitive to us in a world where might makes right and the country with the most weapons wins. But I'm pretty sure the Bible says something about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. That's the work we are called to do.

The God of violence we meet in the Bible will continue to live on as long as we believe our tribe is favored above all other tribes, and that the only way to bring God glory is to eliminate the "them" to protect the "us." But if we remember that Jesus came to show us a better way, we'll move from "the God of us" to "the God of all of us," recognizing the dignity and worth of all people, even those who we believe pose a threat. Jesus said, "Love your enemy." Sometimes I wish he didn't. It would be easier to hate them. In fact, we've tried, over and over and over again. Did it get rid of our enemies? Or did that just make us more enemies? As Dr. King said, "Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."