

VIOLENCE: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

Steve Argue, Associate Pastor for High School, Elmbrook Church

(Presented at Elmbrook church in light of the Columbine Tragedy, April 20, 1999)

Frequently evil rears its ugly head and we get a pure glimpse of it. On Tuesday, April 20, 1999 at Columbine High, we saw its true colors. The New York Times (4.22.99) stated that; "The incident [has] set off a national bout of soul-searching and debates over whether the killings were spurred by easy access to guns or by the violent images on television and in video games to which American children are routinely exposed. President Clinton said in Washington that 'all of us are struggling to understand exactly what happened and why.'"

Shall we have more gun control? I don't know. Exactly how many times must a person be exposed to violence before one acts on it? I don't know. Who am I to blame? The internet, parents, schools, cliques? The story problem seems so complex. What shall we do? While the nation as the New York Times says; "soul-searches and debates," I would suggest we spend more time on the former rather than the latter and as President Clinton stated; "struggle" a bit.

And struggle we will. Perhaps what we have seen in Littleton, CO, like a volcano, is merely an eruption of evil. The fear I have is what lies underneath unnoticed or covered up.

Evil reveals itself in its purest form through violence. And what exactly is evil? Gregory Boyd (God at War) challenges us to "entertain concrete pictures ... when we discuss the problem of evil, if our discussion is to be authentic." The evil event at Columbine High painfully reminds America once again that evil is not an abstract concept, or some theoretical definition but the painful agenda promoted by Satan himself.

Based on empirical observation, we know that Satan is not prejudiced and will unleash his violence on any age, any sex, or any country. His objective is simple: to destroy and to do whatever it takes to make hell on earth. What does hell on earth look and feel like? Its people walking around saying; "I am scared." Wednesday night our youth group talked about Columbine High. Teens shared what they observed in their high schools. There appears to be fear. Fear to reach out. Fear to stand out. Fear to stand up. Fear to be different. Fear that their school might be next. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, we are ironically introducing a generation to the land of the hostage and the home of the afraid. We are turning into hostages of our own freedom and we are in desperate need of saving.

Before we jump to the conclusion that the Devil made them do it. We need to be aware that Satan's tactics are not only focused toward horrid events but are also introduced as new and improved enticements that appear attractive at best and harmless at worst. Evil does not have to force its way in, because we voluntarily open the door and let it into our lives. We live in a time when we seem to have more opportunities to do what we want to do rather than what we have to do, and I believe we are revealing our true hearts.

Ravi Zacharias states: "I am absolutely convinced that meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain; meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure. And that is why we find ourselves emptied of meaning with our pantries still full" (Can Man Live Without God?, 178). When asked by a reporter why his friends would want to learn how to make a bomb, the founder of the Trenchcoat Mafia stated that it was because of boredom. When pleasure proves to not fill the void in one's soul, many will look to evil because filling our void with evil is better than not being filled at all.

When we welcome evil into our lives, it is called sin. Sin means to choose that which is contrary to or forbidden by God. Sin brings a great division between God and us. We position ourselves as enemies of God and reject his plan for our lives and our world. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they went into hiding. Who would not fear standing naked and guilty before Almighty God? Our world hasn't changed. Today we hide behind our successes (emphasizing what I do over who I am) or our failures (playing the victim). If neither of these work we try to make God disappear and convince ourselves that He doesn't exist. After all, Dostoevski said that if God is dead everything is justifiable.

The truth of the matter is that God doesn't go away. As soon as one looks at Columbine High and says; "That's wrong!" They are making a moral judgment based on a moral code. A moral code points to a Moral Code Giver, and this moral code giver is God. Which brings us right back to our relationship to God divided and destroyed by sin.

I have yet to perform a wedding for a couple who hoped their marriage would end in divorce. I have yet to look at a baby picture and see a killer behind the drool. Yet we must remember that evil doesn't start at the divorce or the murder. It starts at the first lust and the first hate. Unchecked sin leads to sin checkmating us. Our country has seen the fruit of voluntary enslavement.

Our separation from God also brings separation between each other. Our sin will bring about 1.2 million divorces this year alone. Our sin will allow 40% of all children to go to bed tonight with a father not living at home. Our sin keeps us believing that quality time is better than quantity time with our kids. Our sin brings about labeling and cliques. Our sin has convinced us that we can "make love" by having sex. Our sin brings racism. Our sin brings a widening gap between the "haves" and the "have nots."

As a result, we have prepared an environment where 1 million children will come into the world this year out of wedlock; where the average child will see 8000 televised murders and 100,000 televised acts of violence by the time he or she finishes elementary school; where 80 percent of teenagers will experiment with alcohol; where 10 percent of teenage boys and 18 percent of teenage girls to attempt suicide this year; where countless babies will be killed right before they are born all in the name of choice; and where the elderly will soon be killed in the name of mercy. The Dow is up and economic growth is exploding, yet people, families, and cities are imploding (Statistics from Walt Mueller, Understanding Today's Youth Culture).

While statistics are helpful, they also make us numb. In America, we are conditioned to forget. How long before we forget Columbine High? How many of us still remember Jonesboro, AK? The sugar-coated evil of Satan is packaged in distraction. How is it that a TV anchor-person can report on a tragedy, give us just enough time to click our tongues or shake our heads, before saying "now this" and we break to an ad for cat food or spend the next ten minutes pondering the weather (Credit goes to Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death for this concept).

Let's not downplay the eruptions of evil in our world nor the covered up evil in our lives nor get distracted. Let's stop and absorb the full impact of evil in our world. Let's let it bug us, rip us apart, until we're brought to tears.

If we are to look at concrete examples of evil, we need to also look at concrete solutions. I offer the following.

Call Sin what it is... Sin. If one does not believe in God, then they cannot condemn the killers in Columbine High, because without a moral code, anything goes. If one makes a moral judgement, they must turn to the Moral Law Giver, God himself and recognize their own sin and separation from God. Repentance involves turning away from sin and turning to God. When we do this, we are promised forgiveness and a restored relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The message of the Gospel does not prescribe condemnation, but describes the reality of our condemned state and God's loving solution for our salvation. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5.6-8). God does not intend on making us nice sinners, but transformed people of God. When I call sin what it is, I then can appreciate and desire the good news of God's salvation.

Get Connected. Sin has not only separated us from God, but has separated us from each other. Once I know the love of God I can love others. Sin and fear pull marriages apart. Sin and fear cultivate parent-child relationships filled with hypocrisy and distrust. Sin and fear keep us looking great on the outside while we are lonely on the inside. Sin and fear keep us competing with our neighbors rather than cultivating relationships with them. Sin and fear bring about cliques of exclusion, gangs of hatred, philosophies of skepticism and cynicism, and relationships of distrust. James urges us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other so that we may be healed (5.16). Confession to God brings forgiveness. Confession to each other levels the playing field and shows us that we need each other's support, encouragement, and accountability. If you and I admit we need help, we can call on God and each other.

Radically love one another. Sin and fear isolate us. Love builds bridges. 1 John 4.9 states; "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." As God has reached out to us in love, we have the opportunity to love God back and to reach out to others in love. Love requires action and desires nothing in return. Teen to teen radical love crosses clique barriers and looks for friendship not sex. Parent to parent radical love looks like parents investing in their marriages and connecting with other parents (singles and

couples) who can share their joys and struggles of being a parent. Parent to teen radical love looks like parents being available and consistent to their teens and teens honoring and being honest with their parents.

Hold each other accountable by taking responsibility. Everyone is definitely not doing it, whatever it might be. Accountability only works if we hold each other accountable and this challenges our post-modern thinking. This takes some guts. I am part of society and I will take a stand and reject the notion that heroes can do wrestle mania, that entertainment can include killing people on video games or watching others do so in movies. I am part of a family and I will reject the notion that I am only proud of my children when they are an honor student rather I will model to them unconditional love. As a male I will hold my male friends accountable to rejecting satisfaction through the lust of pornography or personal value through the addiction workaholicism. I will encourage them to deepen their relationships with their wife and kids. No matter what the cost, I will raise the standard and spur others on to do the same.

In conclusion, this past week has been a challenging one. I have wept for the teens killed, I have processed the event with many of our own teens, I have prayed for the families, and I have wrestled with the wretched face of evil called violence. I have also confessed and repented of my own sins, hated evil all the more, hugged my kids tighter, and have thanked the Lord for saving me when I called for help. Let's call evil, violent or hidden, what it is and treat it that way. For I know that, when it comes to the potential for sinning, but by the grace of God, there is no difference between a youth pastor and a member of the Trenchcoat Mafia.

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