

Noli Temere – Don't Be Afraid

Ken Sehested

Deuteronomy 30:11-19; Jeremiah 18:1-11

September 8, 2013

When she offered the children's story last Sunday, Nancy [Sehested] mentioned that Hillary [Brownsmith]'s sermon for the service was based on a "humdinger" of a text from Jeremiah. It included a scathing denunciation from God on the people—a people who did not ask "Where is the Lord?"; a people who defiled the land, who chased after other gods, who pursued worthless things. *"Therefore once more I accuse you," says the Lord, "and I accuse your children's children."*

It is a hard word. You can imagine the difficulty of coming up with a children's story out of that text, when our children's children are included among the accursed. It's fair to ask, how can our children's children be caught up in this intrigue?

The lectionary keeps us in Jeremiah again this week, with another hard text, with Yahweh God, in the rage of a spurned lover, in a nearly-out-of-control rant against the People of the Promise. Listen to this tale:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." In other words, God says "I want to do a little show and tell."

So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled, and he reworked it into another vessel.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

"And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your doings.'" (Jeremiah 18:1-11)

These are hard things to hear, especially if your ears are only prepared to receive winsome words of comfort and verbal trinkets to make the future look shiny and new and pleasant. For the time being, suffice it to say that the One whom we adore and acknowledge as Sovereign has a feral side; has a wild, untamed streak. The God of Jeremiah's devotion is not one much given to bargaining (although even that character is contradicted a few times in Scripture). This One is no tit-for-tat deity, no scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours kind of God. This God is not snuggly. This One requires single-mindedness and whole-hearted fidelity.

I went to Lowe's last week to get some supplies. As I approached the check-out, I noticed the young woman working the register looking at my T-shirt, and suddenly she let out a spontaneous laugh and said, "That's funny." I'd forgotten that I had on my Fellowship of Reconciliation T-shirt, which has this simple four-word sentence on the front: "I will not kill."

I was . . . well . . . taken aback, to say the least, that the clerk thought it humorous that anyone would wear a shirt that declared "I will not kill." I was so confused I didn't say anything but "yeah."

I'm feeling confused in general these days, especially about the threatened attack on Syria. We have a president who was elected in part because of his criticism of the war in Iraq, and a Secretary of State who had a hard time, initially, getting elected to the U.S. Senate because earlier in his life he was an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam. These two public figures are dual drum majors in the march to war with Syria, while many Republican war hawks are saying "Hold on, not so fast."

It's confusing. Just yesterday there was a guest editorial in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* arguing that a U.S. strike in Syria is a bad idea. The author is a Gulf War veteran and former state legislator—certainly no liberal lefty. And he's arguing against attacking Syria. "What is our warmongering president thinking?" he wrote, and went on to reason like this: George W. Bush started only two wars; Obama hasn't managed to get out of both of those. Then he started another one with Libya, and now wants to start one with Syria. And if that isn't enough, Obama also failed to get permission to leave U.S. troops in Iraq.

It's confusing, watching all the hawks and doves play musical chairs, trying not to be the last one standing. It would also be amusing, if the facts on the ground in Syria weren't so ferocious. The numbers are numbing. I push myself to read the reporting, but fatigue sets in quickly.

Out of a population of 23 million, some two million Syrians have fled the country entirely since the start of civil conflict in March 2011. And at least another four million have been displaced from their homes, fleeing for safety to another part of the country. More than six million on the run. To give some perspective, proportionately that would be equivalent to 82 million U.S. citizens forced to flee their homes.

The country has suffered 100,000 casualties, counting Syrian soldiers, members of dozens of different rebel groups, and noncombatants. In recent days, we have heard repeatedly of the gruesome poison gas attack that killed at least 1,400—probably launched by some Syrian military leader—with or without President Assad's authorization—though possibly by one of the rebel groups attempting to stir up international outrage against the Assad government.

President Obama declared beforehand that any use of chemical weapons represents a "red line" that, if crossed by the Assad government, would cause him to authorize lethal force in response. Much of the bellicose call to arms now revolves around maintaining our country's assumed moral credibility as the world's sole superpower. Lethal force, of course, never leaves home without being decked out in formal moral attire. In the hands of empires, royal violence is always surrounded by its entourage of redemptive attendants.

The TV shout-shows are filled with earnest assessments as to whether the application of more violence, probably in the form of U.S. cruise missiles, will have salutary results in Syria. Some arguments are learned and technical, some are emotional and populist.

The fact that current public opinion polls show a 2-to-1 margin *against* a U.S. strike on Syria is probably testimony to how tired we are of war. Afghanistan and Iraq represent a cumulative total of 22 years.

No wonder we're tired, with more than 800 U.S. military bases outside our borders. No wonder we're tired, with our Special Forces operating in 71 countries¹ and the Armed Forces Radio Network announcing that its sports broadcasts are heard by U.S. military personnel in 192 countries around the world.

But aren't we a "global force for good," as the frequently repeated television ad for the U.S. Navy says? You know, the first version of that ad closed with the camera lingering on the site of a Naval hospital ship, one of the ones with the giant red cross painted on the side. Christian ship. Blood-red cross.

No wonder Muslim countries are tired of us: If we attack Syria, it will be the seventh Muslim country attacked by the U.S. since 2001: Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia. Not to mention a majority-Muslim province of the Philippines, where U.S. Marine-led training evolved into combat missions against the Abu Sayyaf rebels in the Sulu Archipelago.

Of the very many things that need to be said and pondered and decided and acted upon—with regard to how we position ourselves as people of faith in this political crisis that has enormous spiritual stakes—I want to mention only two. The first is our historical amnesia. We have no clue about the Western world's longstanding entanglements and manipulations in the Arab and Muslim world.

In 1949 Deane Hinton was a U.S. Central Intelligence Agent in the Middle East. He was directed to take part in a secret meeting in Damascus planning a coup d'état against the elected Syrian government. Hinton was booted out of the group when he said the following: "I want to go on record saying that this is the stupidest, most irresponsible action a diplomatic mission like ours could get itself involved in, and that we've started a series of these things that will never end."²

That particular coup didn't materialize, but afterward there was a string of military coups, bringing first one, then another, party to power in Syria, until the Ba'ath Party found a toe-hold in 1963, led by the current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad. As it happens, the Ba'ath Party also came to power in Iraq that same year, supported by the CIA—which didn't like the existing monarch of Iraq—after which Saddam Hussein returned to Iraq from exile and was put in charge of the country's security forces.

Saddam, of course, eventually became our nation's #1 enemy, but not because he used chemical weapons against Iran in the eight-year war with them and then against rebellious Kurds in the north of Iraq. Those attacks brought no condemnation from the U.S. In fact, the U.S. supplied strategic military intelligence that compounded the effect of Saddam's chemical attack against Iranian forces.³

I'm just sayin'... President Obama, Secretary Kerry, Congressional leaders: Be careful on that high moral horse you're riding regarding the "obscenity" of chemical weapons. *Pride goeth before a fall*. And before getting all righteous about upholding international agreements on chemical weapons, remember that international agreements—namely, the U.N. Charter, which the U.S. helped to write—also say that one country can't unilaterally attack another unless threatened by invasion. Assad's army is nowhere near the Statue of Liberty.

Of course, there's former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's famous 1973 dictum that summarizes a century of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: "Oil is much too important a commodity to be left in the hands of the Arabs."⁴

At the time of Iraq's chemical weapons attack, Iran was our #1 enemy. Many of you will remember the black eye we got during the 1979 revolution and takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, when embassy personnel were taken hostage. Oh, the nerve of those people!

But even today, few U.S. citizens seem to know that our CIA planned and sponsored, with help from our British friends, a 1953 coup d'état against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and reinstated the former despotic monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. What we citizens don't seem to comprehend is that, especially in foreign policy, our nation's economic interests frequently overwhelm and sequester our political values.

And also this: Because our virtues as a nation are considerable (and I think they are), we tend to think our vices unremarkable. Such is not the case. What I'm saying is that if we are to rightly interpret our condition—if we are to hear what the Word of the Lord is saying to us as a people—we simply must take seriously the whole story of our nation's history.

There's a lot more where these hard facts come from, but let me move on to the second important thing that needs our attention. Recently the *New York Times* double Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Nicholas Kristof, writing about the truly heinous, murderous Assad policies in Syria and President Obama's pledge to launch an attack, said the following: "Are the risks greater if we launch missiles, or if we continue to sit on our hands?...We can't just whimper and back down!"

As if the only option to escalating the violence is to sit on our hands. As if raining yet more deadly force upon an already lethal conflict is the only alternative to whimpering and backing down. Whether deserved or not, this kind of polar thinking represents the most common public perception of the pacifist tradition: doing nothing—and thus, at least indirectly, capitulating to the reign of injustice and cruelty.

One of my favorite modern quotes comes from a group of essays written after a five-year dialogue between Mennonite and Roman Catholic scholars. One of them wrote: "We must acknowledge the essential defect in the just war tradition, which is the assumption that violence can somehow achieve justice. And we must with equal courage acknowledge the essential defect in pacifism, which is the assumption that justice can somehow be achieved simply by opposing violence."⁵

I've had this crazy vision, an outrageous idea. What if a group of faith leaders—maybe Pope Francis would have enough gravitas to pull it off—what if a group of leaders from Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions—and for that matter, leaders of any and every religious tradition—what if they were moved by the horror unfolding in Syria that they're willing to take serious risks in response? What if they divided up this unlikely entourage of faith leaders from around the world, so that one group would go to Turkey, on Syria's northern boundary; another group to Iraq, to the west; another to Jordan in the south; and the fourth split between Lebanon and Israel in the east. And at a predetermined time, each of the four groups pushes past border checkpoints into Syria, banners flying, demanding that all conflicting parties—both within Syria and international backers—come to Damascus, be locked in a room and not allowed out until the framework of a negotiated process is reached?

What if these leaders resolved ahead of time, and pledged to each other, to complete this mission even if it meant dying in the process? Ten years ago an interfaith group of Christian and Muslim women in Liberia did just this sort of thing and extracted from those warring political leaders a political framework to end the civil war.⁶

What do you think? Is it crazy to think about hundreds, maybe thousands, of national and international religious leaders converging on Syria from every point on the map? Is that too fantastic a thought? Too unrealistic to even imagine?

Maybe. But I ask you: Is it any less fanciful to think that cruise missile strikes against Syrian government forces lead to a political solution, to a pause in the conflict and negotiations for a permanent settlement?

If moral forces are to be effectively brought to bear against the unraveling of Syrian society, it will require a similar kind of bold political imagination. And if such bold political experiments are put forth as alternatives to the ever-deepening spiral of violence in Syria—and there are a host of very practical, measurable strategic suggestions on how to accomplish this—it will require that we put some skin in the game.

There must be a people ready, a legion willing to follow a wild and untamed God into the jaws of destruction, all for the sake of a vision of the beloved community, for the healing of the nations, for the children of Syria. Short of that, the curse on their children's children will haunt the hills of Syria for generations to come. And, quite likely, spill over into a mushrooming region of conflict pitting a multitude of nations against each other.

That T-shirt I mentioned at the beginning—the one with “I will not kill” written on the front—I confess that there have been trying times and difficult circumstances when the thought has come to my mind: “But for you I’ll make an exception.” That’s why I keep coming back to this tent of meeting, this sanctuary kitchen, this small gathering of People on the Way with Jesus. Week after week. Year after year.

The decision for blessing and life, and against curses and death, is never completely settled in us. We have to revisit and renew and refresh the vision that keeps us going even in trying times and difficult circumstances. We have to decide again and again what it means to choose life.

Fear not, beloveds. *Noli temere. Noli timidus.* Don’t be timid. A way forward will be made. But not until we begin walking.

¹ <http://www.alternet.org/world/american-special-ops-forces-now-operating-71-countries>

² <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/01/14/1178686/-How-the-US-help-put-Assad-in-power-in-Syria>

³ A recently declassified document of this fact confirmed what was already widely known:

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/25/secret_cia_files_prove_america_helped_saddam_as_he_gassed_iran

⁴ Quoted in Hans von Sponeck/Denis Halliday, “The Hostage Nation,” *The Guardian*, 29 November 2001.

⁵ Ivan J. Kauffman, in *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative response to world violence*, edited by Gerald Schlabach, a collection of essays done by participants in a 5-year dialogue of Roman Catholic and Mennonite theologians seeking common ground. Kauffman was raised Mennonite, then became a Roman Catholic.

⁶ A documentary film about this nonviolent struggle, titled “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” was released in 2011 and is available on the web.

Quotes:

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