

God's Desire for Resurrection

(Easter testimony-homily)

A little over two years ago I witnessed the shooting death of a young, 19 year old, Black man. He fell face down on the snow-covered sidewalk about 20 feet from me. I knelt beside him, helped turn him over and loosen his coat around his neck, blood bubbling out of his nose, dying in front of me, and there was nothing I could do but pray, "Lord, have mercy!"

This past week I witnessed the trial of his killer, another young Black man, 28 years old, who claimed he shot from his car door because he feared he was being attacked by an unknown assailant who had shot at him some months earlier, while he was sitting on a porch, several blocks away.

One question I have this morning: What does Jesus' resurrection have to do with young Black men living in the awareness that life is cheap, dangerous, and short? What does Jesus' life have to do with persons in these circumstances? And Jesus' death? As I've focused on the details of Jesus' death this week, my mind keeps going over and over what I witnessed that day in the death of Shamar Barnes, depicted in the trial in minute detail, down to the description by the pathologist of the single bullet that pierced his lungs, then his heart and lodged in his shoulder blade. And the resurrection?

Can the resurrection make some impact, here and now, on the tragedies of Shamar Barnes, who was murdered, and Darius Thomas, who murdered him?

This past week I've been rereading seven "Letters to American Christians" written back in the 80's by a Mennonite "prophet", John Stoner. "Does God save us from our enemies?" he asks, "does God save us from enemies?" Yes, he says, and the strongest evidence of that is the Resurrection of Jesus.

The Biblical narrative is full, OT and NT, of stories of God's deliverance of peoples and individuals from oppression and destruction by their enemies: the exodus from Egypt, Daniel in the lion's den, Paul and Silas in the prison at Phillipi. And not only does God save from enemies, but God loves, and teaches us to, love our enemies.

The first command on the lips of Jesus in Luke's Gospel is "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." (Lk 6:27f.) Stoner calls this "the central element of the call to conversion by Jesus."

Love your enemies, God will save you from them. What does that mean? Well, obviously it doesn't mean we won't suffer, or even die, at the hands of enemies. But it does mean that even if we suffer and die at their hands, we will be saved from them. That's what happened to Jesus. He loved his enemies, they killed him, and God saved him—not from death, but from what? The supremacy, or power, of evil—I don't know else what to call it. Jesus was saved to return and walk among his enemies—and his friends who betrayed him—not to avenge himself or punish or shame them, but to love and forgive them. Jesus was saved from the intention of his enemies to "cancel" him, to obliterate him, by killing him.

What is so important about the resurrection of Jesus is that it happened on earth, among people who knew him, in the present age, and it transformed his defeated followers into enemy-lovers and God-trusters like himself.

This morning we've heard Matthew's story of the resurrection. And we've also heard the account (in Acts 10) of Peter's preaching the resurrection to the friends and family of a Roman soldier: "This is the message of peace sent to the Israelites...by Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! God was with him. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen... —and while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone who heard the word." (10:36-44)

What is noteworthy in this story from Acts is the transforming presence of the resurrected Jesus in that moment; it's not just the story retold, but it's Jesus, resurrected, becoming actively present in the midst of the hearers, in the lives of these men and women who were listening.

Why is this important? It's important because Jesus' followers are not going to love their enemies and trust God to save them from their enemies—unless they are somehow empowered to do that, by the Spirit of Jesus in them. How do we know

that? It must be true because so many in our society who claim to be Christians, nonetheless do not love their enemies nor trust God to save them from their enemies. Rather, they—or should I say “we”?—trust the US military to save us from national enemies and we trust in guns to save us from our neighbors and fellow citizens.

Christian politicians clamor for larger expenditures for bombs and weapons to save us and our allies from enemies. Christian civic leaders, Christian legislators, to say nothing of pastors and evangelists, not only advocate the right to have guns for self-defense, some argue for the duty to carry guns for protection of self and family.

I come back to young Black men. Shamar Barnes was unarmed when he was killed two years ago at the Marathon station on S. Main St. Was he not carrying a gun because he was trusting God to protect him from enemies? Had he ever heard the message of God’s desire to save and protect his children and to love one’s enemies? I don’t know. I met his mother on Wednesday, and I would like to find out more about him. Maybe he didn’t have personal enemies, or didn’t fear them. I don’t know.

In contrast, Darius Thomas was armed, and I gather that perhaps he always carried a gun to protect himself; but then, who could blame him, growing up, as he testified in the trial, in settings of poverty and crime in Goshen, Elkhart, and Saginaw MI, which he called the “murder capital of the world”? Could the resurrection of Jesus ever convert him to put his trust in God to save him from his enemies, and therefore not need to carry a gun? Has he ever even considered that option, since so few people in this culture recommend it? It’s not impossible, since I know that our friend Robert Hunt experienced just such a conversion, years ago in prison. Maybe that will happen to Darius Thomas, by some miracle of God’s grace.

What can change our hearts and minds? What can convert us? The story in Acts 10 suggests that as the story of Jesus’ resurrection was being told, the Spirit of resurrected Jesus came upon the listeners and somehow transformed them. And the Jewish Christian believers, who had come along with Peter, were “astounded” that Jesus’ Spirit came upon even these people—Gentiles, pagans, ritually unclean. Of

course, they were, apparently, favorably disposed, by their friend and relative Cornelius, toward Peter and his story.

What I want to say today is that we should not be surprised to realize, to experience in our lives and relationships, that the resurrection of Jesus makes a difference. Maybe our issue is not “trusting guns to protect us.” Maybe our issue is not even “loving enemies.” Maybe our issue is loving friends, brothers and sisters, family members even. Maybe our issue is trusting our investments and hard work and wisdom to save us. The resurrection of Jesus is God’s “sign” that Jesus’ steadfast resistance to the evil around him that enraged his enemies, and his trust in God, rather than swords and violence, to save him, is what God desires. And the wonder of the resurrection that indwelt Jesus is that it also indwells God’s whole creation, as we see in these days, and that wonder and power can indwell and empower all people, including ourselves.