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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2:13-23
"Massacre, Morality and Mandela"

The biblical story just read is called the "Massacre of the Innocents." It is so horrendous and strikes such a powerful chord that it has become the subject of many paintings by excellent artists throughout the centuries.

A troubling kink in the story is why God warns Mary and Joseph of Herod's intentions but does not warn the parents and protectors of the other children. The story is like a fairy tale. It doesn't make total sense but we draw moral lessons from it anyway.

My focus is on the killing of the innocents, the morality of it all, and some philosophy from scripture and South Africa's iconic leader Nelson Mandela.

One is appalled and horrified by the killing of children here and anywhere in the world. The amazing thing is that it happens at all.

I was struck by two similar modern stories. The first is ironic. It appeared in the Independent Catholic News on June 9, 2013. It states:

"Official statistics from the Ministry of Information in Ramallah have revealed that 1,518 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces from September 2000 up to April 2013. That's the equivalent of one Palestinian child killed by Israel every three days for almost 13 years.

"The International Day for the Protection of Children is on June 1," said a spokesman, "but Palestinian children are still subject to attacks by the Israelis and Jewish settlers on an almost daily basis."

The next account came in "The Authorized Portrait" of Nelson Mandela, which I read during the Christmas break. Mandela was in jail on Robben Island when hundreds of schoolchildren were gunned down by police in Soweto, outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, on June 16, 1976.

The news reached Robben Island and Mandela managed to smuggle out a letter that read: "We who are confined within the grey walls of the Pretoria regime's prisons reach out to our people. With you, we count those who have perished by means of the gun and the hangman's rope. We salute all of you – the living, the injured, and the dead. For you have dared to rise up against the tyrant's might..."

“We face the future with confidence. For the guns that serve apartheid cannot render it unconquerable. Those who live by the gun shall perish by the gun.”

The only question I ask at this stage is (and it’s a moral question), “What gives anyone the right to kill children and/or to kill anyone for that matter?” This to me is a significant religious/theological/spiritual question. We simply cannot be complicit to any killing of human beings and must do everything in our power to prevent it. There is no justification for this.

Former foreign correspondent for the New York Times Chris Hedges writes in his book *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*: “I have stood over the bodies – including the bodies of children – left in the wake of suicide bombings by Islamic militants in Jerusalem. I have also knelt beside the frail, thin bodies of boys shot for sport by Israeli soldiers in the Gaza strip. What is the moral difference? I do not see one.” (p. 145)

My sermon will now switch to another Mandela moment. His story is powerful and profound. If anyone wants to read the portrait you can read my copy. The narrative is all the white pages and every picture is captioned. The remainder of the book is taken up with interviews with everyone under the sun.

I seriously thought of calling this sermon, “The Gospel according to Nelson Mandela” in the vein of the Gospel according to Peanuts or the Gospel according to the Beatles. I shall share a couple of quotes from this imagined sermon and before I do I shall read a parallel in scripture.

Galatians 5:13-25 states, ¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

“²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

This is a tough passage. We often hear about the fruit of the spirit but seldom about the works of the flesh. Mandela said something similar. About 10 years after being incarcerated on Robben Island he wrote a letter to his wife Winnie. The authorized portrait says it best.

“...Mandela found that the cell gave him the opportunity to meditate on his life, his feelings, and his thoughts. At an age when most men would be set in their ways, he was imprisoned in a place that could ferment bitterness and a desire for revenge, yet he found value in his circumstances.

“In judging our progress as individuals,” he would write to Winnie, “we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one’s social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education...but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one’s development as a human being: honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men – qualities within the reach of every soul...”

Elsewhere, Mandela affirms equity and peace with justice. This sermon has moved from the ridiculous (the killing of children) to the sublime and that’s where God wants us to be.

I can do no better for this sermon than to conclude with one of Mandela’s famous quotes, which concludes the recent Time magazine’s “Special Commemorative Edition” on Nelson Mandela. At the Rivonia trial when Mandela could have received the death sentence (he was given a life sentence instead), he scribbled these words:

“During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

I might be writing here the Gospel according to Nelson Mandela, which is Jesus Christ, reflected in his life. We saw that expressed powerfully after his release during his presidency when he set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to provide healing and amnesty for the victims and the perpetrators of apartheid.

We'll end the sermon here in the spirit of Jesus Christ, in Paul's fruit of the spirit, and in Mandela's indomitable spirit. There is a lot to go on as we continue into the New Year. Amen.