

KNOCKING OFF THE SHACKLES¹
John 1: 29-42
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
January 16, 2011

We have all been reminded this week that we live in an insanely violent society. Since 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered in Memphis, more than a million people have been gunned down in this country. News of homicides has become for some background noise on TV. We hardly notice unless it is in our neighborhood. Marion Wright Edelman, the head of the Children's Defense Fund, said "we're losing eight children and teenagers a day to gun violence."²

I

How sad and revolted we all are at what happened in Tucson. But we were sad and revolted after Columbine...after Virginia Tech...after Oklahoma City...after John Muhammad and Lee Malvo picked off ten people from the trunk of their car in Maryland and Virginia...after John Hinckley and Timothy McVae and Sirhan Sirhan and James Earl Ray and Lee Harvey Oswald, and now we may add another name to that tragic list: Jared Loughner. What a heart-breaking and maddening list!

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 16, 2011.

² Quoted in Bob Herbert, "A Flood Tide of Murder," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2011.

Being sad and revolted, of course, is not enough. We all recognize that it will take more than candlelight vigils and bi-partisan resolutions to stem the tide of violence in our society. How can we counter the sense of futility over how to transform the vitriolic climate of our times? More specifically, what can we, this congregation at this time in this community, do to promote peace in our national and community life?

We recognize that the horrible tragedy in Arizona could have happened anywhere elected officials meet with their constituents. Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnic spoke with more clarity than most when he said that this must be an occasion for national soul searching. It should also be an occasion for religious soul searching. We speak of Jesus as “the Prince of Peace,” and we revere his beatitude that says, *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*. Peacemaking is clearly one of our central tasks as Christians. That soul searching then must include the question, “What am I doing to make peace in my world?”

We don't gather today with any pious assumptions that this climate of hatred can be solved by holding hands and singing cum-by-yah around a national campfire. Political and religious disagreements will continue to be sharp. We offer no simplistic and pious answers to something as complex as the violence we deplore.

But we will see signs of encouragement when we see the right and left begin to treat one another like human beings instead of arch enemies. We will see signs of encouragement when we see religious differences couched in an attitude of humility. We will see signs of encouragement when we see the swelling of a national movement to boycott violence and gore as a primary form of entertainment. We will see signs of hope when the National Rifle Association admits that the founding fathers could not imagine the technology of a semi-automatic pistol made only for killing as many people as possible.

We will see signs of encouragement when funding for the treatment of mental illness is handled with as much respect as funding for new weapons systems. We will see signs of hope when media commentators who demonize those who disagree with them find that their ratings are in the cellar. We will see signs of encouragement when gay-bashing is no longer seen as an acceptable form of small talk, and derogatory jokes about people who are learning English as a 2nd, 3rd, or even 4th language are no longer cool. We will see signs of encouragement when “trash talk” is considered just that...trash. We will see signs of encouragement when religious congregations of all kinds do some serious soul-searching about how we create environments that help peace and mutual respect grow or allow violence and hatred to enter.

We are such a small part of our nation, but we are a part. Few of us can influence what happens in world affairs, but we can contribute to peace in our neighborhood, our community, our church. We cannot stand up to the power of powerful lobbyists in Washington, but we can stand up to the huff and puff of bullies and charlatans who foment hatred in our communities. We cannot eliminate prejudice in the world, but we can eliminate prejudice in our hearts. We cannot heal all the divisions of race and class in our nation, but we can contribute to that healing in our congregation and in our neighborhoods. As the President said this week in his address in Tucson: "...in the fleeting time we have on this earth, what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame—but rather, how well we have loved, and what small part we have played in bettering the lives of others."

II

When I planned this sermon weeks ago, I thought it would be a normal Martin Luther King weekend. I wanted to tell the extraordinary true story about a Baptist named Robert Carter III, one of the largest slave owners in colonial Virginia, who shocked his neighbors when in 1791 he freed his 500 slaves for religious reasons. He was one of the richest men in North America, the owner of sixteen vast plantations that stretched from the Chesapeake Bay to the northern Shenandoah Valley. He owned a foundry in Baltimore and a

mansion in Williamsburg. He even loaned money to Thomas Jefferson. But 220 years ago he stunned that plantation society when he did what he could to better the lives of others. He freed all 500 of his slaves.

This act of conscience by one person is not well known outside a circle of historians, but it is the largest private act of emancipation ever recorded in this country. In his fleeting time on earth, Robert Carter did what he could. It took a lot of courage, for his neighbors did not approve of his actions. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were great, visionary leaders. But Washington died with over 300 slaves. Jefferson died with over 250 slaves. Robert Carter III died with zero slaves. He took that extra step. He knocked off the shackles of slavery for 500 hundred human beings, whose descendents now number many thousands.

III

I tell the story of Robert Carter III because it is directly related to the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., and it is directly related to our longing for peace after the shootings in Tucson. Both Robert Carter and Martin Luther King, Jr. were acting not just out of a political conviction, but out of a theological conviction! Behind the legal and social ramifications of their actions came the profound theological conviction expressed by the well-known children's song: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the

world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” So, too, our longing for peace and safety on our streets and in our gatherings can be seen as a part of the larger fabric of hope for all God’s children of every race.

When we feel that same theological breeze of God’s spirit blowing on us, and we act on it, doing what we can in our generation, we are joining a great host of God’s people of every race and nation, some like Robert Carter largely unknown, but all making their contributions to the great hope of treating all God’s people as human beings.

You want to do something positive in response to the horror in Tucson? I do too. So let’s make a pact today that we will start where we are: at home, at church, at school, in the office, on the computer. We will treat one another as human beings. We will debate ideas without condemning others. We will stand for justice. We will speak out for the right. We will shun violence. We will advocate for common sense laws to protect all citizens. We will pray for God’s spirit to lead us as a church and as a nation.

IV

Just a footnote to the story of Robert Carter III: when he died in 1804, he was living in his magnificent country estate in Westmorland County,

Virginia. Out in the family cemetery you will find only a handful of tombstones, but not one of them bears the name of Robert Carter III.

This man, remembering all the slaves through the years who had died and been buried in unmarked graves, insisted that his grave have no tombstone. Even in his death, he gave testimony to the conviction that we are all equally loved by God. Now, no one can even fix the place of his grave, but his monument is not made of stone. Robert Carter's monument is generation after generation of human beings who were free to become the best that they could be.

In the long run, I suppose that the best monument any of us could hope for in generations to come is that our lives helped to knock the shackles off some people and gave them the chance to become the best that they could be.