

Jacob Blesses Simeon and Levi

October 15, 2017

Rev. Jerry Hamstra

Two weeks ago, on the night of October 1st a gunman shot hundreds of people who were attending a concert in Las Vegas, killing 58 of them and injuring 489. This incident is the now the deadliest mass shooting of quite a number of similar shootings that have taken place in the United States in the last number of years. When these things happen, we are shocked and horrified. We wonder why anyone would want to cause so much suffering. We can't imagine what would go through someone's head to make them do such a thing. And we should be horrified. We should never come to the point that we take such tragedies in stride. We should be profoundly disturbed at such an expression of evil. We should grieve the senseless loss of life. We should feel for the people who have lost love ones and for those who have been injured. But one thing we should not be is surprised that such things happen.

We should not be surprised because there is nothing new about senseless killing and cruelty and naked evil. Think of the 6 million Jews killed in the holocaust. Think of the 20 million or so killed as a result of Stalin's policies. Think of the Rwandan Genocide. Think of other atrocities that take place during wars. Think of the way prisoners of war have sometimes been treated. Think of serial killers. Think of sadists who actually get pleasure from torturing others. Horrific as senseless killing and cruelty is, it is not rare. It is actually quite common.

The fact is that human beings are capable of both incredible evil and cruelty and wonderful acts of kindness and sacrifice. One man heartlessly kills and injures people for sport or hatred or cruelty. Another gives his life to save another human being or dedicates her life to helping people in a poor country. Human beings do horrible things and human beings do wonderful things. And the Bible tells us why. We are sinners because of the fall of Adam in the garden. There is evil at the heart of each one of us. Shortly before the flood, we are told in Genesis

6:5, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intension of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” There is horrendous evil in human beings. And one of the ways that that manifests itself is by the violence and killing in the world. This is what human beings are like.

And yet not everyone is as evil. Most people recognize that there is evil within them and yet not everyone takes pleasure in killing other people. Many people are kind and helpful and caring. Reformed theologians have explained this using the concept of common grace. Common grace teaches that God restrains evil in many people who are not believers so that they are capable of kindness and cooperation so that it is possible for people to live together in societies. Paul in Romans 2:14 speaks of “Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires....”

Now I mention the fact of common grace to give a balanced perspective. We should not be surprised by evil and violence because human beings are evil. But at the same time mankind is not only evil. There is also a lot of goodness. But we’re going to focus on the evil in this sermon because that is what our text is about. We are working our way through Genesis 49 which is the chapter in which the dying Jacob blesses each of his sons. Many of the blessings do not sound like blessings at all, but they can be seen as blessings because none of the sons is banished. They remain part of the people of God. But their sins are dealt with. Their sins have consequences.

So today we will consider what Jacob says to Simeon and Levi. Jacob deals with their violence and their anger and their cruelty. This is why I started out reflecting on cruelty and violence in the world. These two sons of Jacob are confronted with their violence by their dying father. And because of what they had done, God, through Jacob, says to them, “I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.” First, we will look at what they did. Then we will consider the consequences of that. And then we will consider what this means for us.

The story is told in Genesis 34. It begins with the rape of Dinah, their sister. The son of the prince of an un-named city rapes Dinah. He fell in love with her and wanted to marry her. So, the father, Hamor the Hivite,

speaks to Jacob to try to arrange a marriage. The sons of Jacob get involved in the negotiation. The text says that they were speaking deceitfully. They say that if Hamor and his son and all the men of his city get circumcised, Jacob's family and the people of that town would be considered one people and there could be marriages between them. And the prince and his son agree to that. They talk the men of the town into it. And so, all the men of the town are circumcised. Men who have just been circumcised are hurting and so they are vulnerable to attack. Simeon and Levi take advantage of that, went into the city and killed all the men with their swords and took back their sister Dinah. Later the rest of the sons go and plunder the town.

Simeon and Levi are the ones who murdered all those recently circumcised men. It was an act of treachery. It was an act of vengeance. They slaughtered a bunch of men most of whom had had nothing to do with the rape of their sister. They just murdered a whole town full of men because they were angry that their sister had been violated. Their anger was justified. Their revenge was not.

Jacob brings this up in the presence of all the brothers as he was coming to the end of life. "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness, they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."

There are consequences – consequences for their posterity. The tribe of Simeon never became a large tribe. During the time in the wilderness the number of the tribe of Simeon dwindled. When the time came for the land of Canaan to be divided up among the tribes, Simeon did not get its own territory. It was given a number of cities within the territory of Judah. And finally, they are absorbed into the tribe of Judah. The tribe of Levi fared differently. In connection with the incident of the golden calf many years later, the tribe of Levi stood with Moses. God used them to punish many of the people of Israel who had worshipped the golden calf. And in Exodus 32:29, Moses says to them, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord...." When the time came

to divide up the land of Canaan, the tribe of Levi was scattered throughout the land as a tribe of priests and temple officials in the service of the Lord. In the case of Levi, the prophecy of them being scattered among Israel came true, but because they had stood with Moses in the incident of the golden calf, the curse was changed to a blessing and an honor as they became the tribe of the priests within Israel.

Well, let's look at the significance of these verses about Simeon and Levi for us. These two brothers are presented in a negative way because they were violent men. The text mentions their violence, their anger and their cruelty. What they had done was contrary to the will of God. This is part of the Bible's message that violence and murder are not acceptable to God.

It is significant that the first sin recorded in the Bible after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin was the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Genesis 4 describes the family of Adam and Eve after the fall and after God pronounced his curse on them and the world because of their sin. And it only takes 8 verses until we read of the first murder. And the message is that this is what human beings are now like – this is what sinful human beings do to one another. Then in verses 23-24 of Genesis 4, the first chapter describing the post-fall world, we read of Lamech who sang this song to his two wives, [this is poetry] "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. ²⁴If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

This is the post-fall world. It is a world in which people killing other people is common. It is a violent world. This is what mankind is now like because of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. People killing other people is one of the great themes of history. There is hatred. There is vengeance. There is cruelty. There is selfishness. And all this leads to a lot of bloodshed. This is why we should not be surprised when someone smashes a hotel window and shoot hundreds of bullets into a crowd. It stands out because it is close to home. It stands out because we don't understand the motive in this case. But it does not stand out in the history of the world. People have been killing one another since Cain

killed Abel. We are a people to whom hatred comes easy and who are prone to violence and murder. There is common grace so that the evil within us is restrained to make it possible for us to live together in communities, but the evil within us as human beings is such that violence and cruelty and murder are a huge part of every period in history and every society. This is life in a fallen world. This is the result of sin. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. That is true in a lot of different ways. Sin and death go hand in hand in all kinds of ways.

We can be thankful for the degree of restraint that God does provide. There is the fact that many people do “by nature what the law requires” (Romans 2:14) so that there are many who are kind and caring. There is the civil government which restrains evil by its laws and penalties. We do not live in a world of utter lawlessness. But we all realize that we are broken in many ways and most people realize that there is a part of them that is dark and evil. And we see how that breaks out in many different ways from unkindness and indifference to the suffering of others to violence and murder and cruelty.

Simeon and Levi are examples of the violence that is such a common part of the human experience. But the passage makes it clear that what they did was displeasing to God. These verses are a rebuke to them for what they had done. And the consequence for their posterity is that their offspring will be scattered among the people of Israel. These verses reflect the anger of God towards them because of what they had done. God was not indifferent about the fact that they had slaughtered a town full of men who were in too much pain to mount much of a defense. And that is a reflection of the fact that God is not indifferent to the violence and killing and cruelty that is so common in our world.

Why is that? What is behind God’s displeasure at what Simeon and Levi did? After all, God has no problem with people killing animals. He does not approve of cruelty to animals as the rebuke in these verses for cruelly injuring the oxen makes clear, but in Genesis 9:3 he tells us that he has given us animals for food. Today vast numbers of animals are slaughtered in our slaughter houses and most of us rightly do not feel guilty about enjoying a steak or a pork chop. A cow or a pig has died so that we can enjoy our meat and God approves. Cows and pigs may be

killed to provide us with meat. Their significance is that they are a supply of meat and leather and glue. But the killing of a human being is all-together different. And that is reflected in God's anger towards Simeon and Levi that is expressed in our text.

The reason is that human beings are made in the image of God and therefore there is something sacred about human life. This is behind the penalty of capital punishment for murder that God requires in Genesis 9:6. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Now I'm not sure why God did not require the death penalty for Simeon and Levi, but it is clear from Israel's laws that God required the death penalty for murder in Israel and when God in Romans 13 gives the government the power of the sword, the implication is that the penalty for murder should still be the death penalty.

But what I want to focus on is the fact that the reason that murdering another human being is a sin is that human beings are made in the image of God. That is why you can humanely kill a cow with God's approval, but murdering another human being is a terrible sin. Human beings are special because they are made in the image of God. There is a sacredness of human life that is not true of animal life. Each human being is precious in the sight of God and so each human life is to be precious in the sight of mankind as well.

I used the term sacred to refer to human life. The word "sacred" is appropriate because it refers to something that is set apart for God. The status of human beings is utterly unique among created beings because we are created in the image of God. That gives human beings a value that is not shared by anything else on the earth. Human beings are God-like beings and it is that God-likeness that make human life sacred. And we instinctively know that when we compare the death of a dog or a cow with the death of a human being. The death of a dog or a cow is in a completely different category than the death of a human being. Every human being is a unique and an irreplaceable person. We have unique and precious personalities. We have incredible capabilities because of our intellect and physical abilities. There is a depth of personality that is unlike any animal. There are the abilities for deep relationships. And

most fundamentally there is the ability for a relationship with God. Because of all that each human being is precious to God.

And that is why God is greatly displeased when we use the gifts that God has given us to enhance life to destroy life. When we think of the wonder and the glory and the preciousness of the human person, it gives us a sense of the awful nature of sin that hatred and violence and murder are such a common part of human experience. This is the theology that is reflected in Jacob's rebuke of Simeon and Levi for the murders they committed in retaliation for the rape of their sister.

Now what we have covered so far gives us a biblical perspective on the bloodshed that is so common in our world. It helps us to see the great evil of murdering a person made in the image of God. It reminds us of the awful nature of sin. It reminds us of the evil of human nature that the slaughter of large numbers of people is not uncommon in our world. That evil is reflected in the holocaust of abortion as well. However, God through his word in the Bible, will not allow us to consider this whole situation from the perspective of an observer. Jesus, in particular, teaches us that there is a continuum from the kind of killing that we observe in the world around us and the evil that lives in each one of our hearts.

This is one of the things that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:21–22, "²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Jesus is not saying that there is no difference at all between murder and anger or insulting others. But he is saying that that they are both in the same category of sin. There is a relationship between sinful anger and murder. There is a relationship between insulting and despising other people and murder. These sins are on the same continuum. They all have to do with mistreating and despising and hating people made in the image of God. And they all come from the same place – from hearts that hate and want to harm other human beings. Jesus is not saying that there is no difference at all between murder and sinful anger at other

people, but he is saying that anger and insults and calling other people fools is much more serious than we tend to think and also that they are not as far removed from murder as we tend to think. And we see that by the penalties. Sinful anger makes one liable to judgment. Insulting makes one liable to the council. Calling another a fool makes one liable to the hell of fire.

What this means is that we may not distance ourselves too much from mass shooters. Theirs is just a more extreme expression of the same evil that lives in each one of us by nature. We do not all kill other people, but we do all hate and mistreat and harm other people. We despise some of our fellow human beings. We harm others by our words and by our indifference to their suffering. In all kinds of ways, we fail to treat others with the love and respect that we owe them as sacred human beings made in the image of God. The point is that we all have the same evil hearts. We are not of a different species than the mass shooters. This is what human beings are capable of and who knows what we are capable of given the right circumstances. Jesus will not allow us to make an absolute distinction between murder and other ways of expressing hatred and animosity to our fellow man.

So where do we go from here.

Well the Bible is a message of hope. It is a message that deals with the reality of sin and the evil of the human race, but the overall message is that God has worked through this sad and sordid history to overthrow the curse of sin and to bring about the renewal of his creation and a people who have been delivered from sin and its awful consequences.

Simeon and Levi are examples of human sinfulness and violence. They point us to the evil human nature that we all share that is the cause of bloody history of mankind. But they were also part of the people of promise through whom God was going to bless the world. We may believe that they repented for their sins because they continued to be number among the people of God.

But in the fullness of time out of that terribly flawed chosen people, God was going to raise up a Saviour who would undo the curse of sin that has resulted in people with evil hearts who are so prone to the

hatred that leads to murder and to gossip and indifference. In all of this history leading to Jesus, God was teaching the world the horrific consequences of the sinful natures that we all share and in that way preparing the world for the one who came from heaven and became a man so that as the God-man he could break the power of sin in the lives of a chosen people. He did that by living a life of perfect obedience and love. He did it by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. He did it by rising from the dead and thus obtaining the forgiveness and new life that would enable his people to gradually learn to love rather than to hate.

In the new heavens and the new earth, there will be peace – shalom. Micah described this in OT language when he prophesied that people would come to the house of the God of Jacob to be taught the ways of the Lord so that they might walk in his paths. He spoke about a time when people would “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks... (Micah 4:3). When Jesus was born the angels sang that he had come to bring peace on earth (Luke 2:14). That peace begins with peace with God and it flowers into peace between people.

This begins now already for those who are the followers of Christ. He calls us to love one another and he equips us to love one another through the new life that he gives. He gives the fruit of the Spirit which is “love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” And on the basis of the power that he gives, he calls us to be the people who demonstrate in their lives together the beginning of the shalom of the new creation.

This comes down to some very specific behaviors and attitudes for us. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Paul tells us to serve one another in love. Jesus tells us to forgive one another and to love others as he has loved us. Paul tells us to put away “anger, wrath, malice, slander...” and to put on “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...” (Colossians 3:8 & 12).

Simeon and Levi show us what we are like by nature. They point us to the evil that still remains in us. But the NT in its description of the Christian life point us to what we are in Christ and calls us to begin to

live the life of love that we will live in perfection when the kingdom of God has fully come. We are to show in our lives a foretaste of the shalom that will characterize the world that is to come. And as we live in a world in which violence and bloodshed and cruelty are all too common we can live in the sure hope that the hatred and killing that entered the world when sin entered the world will one day be no more and there will be peace – a peace that is rooted in peace with God as all peace must be.

Jesus Christ is the prince of peace. He overcame the cause of all hatred and killing and one day he will usher in a world of peace. And as we wait for that great day let us demonstrate to each other and to the world the beginning of that for which we wait.