

Amy Jacober, PhD
Sonoran Theological Group
Amy.Jacober@sonorantheological.org
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Church and the Unmaking of Violence in the Experience of Those with Disabilities

Abstract

Violence comes in many forms for people with disabilities. It arrives in unwelcomed looks, unsolicited touches and unwanted taunts, name calling, and discrimination. The church has a role to unmake the violent climate surrounding all created in the image of God, in particular, those with disabilities. This paper will address the role of the church in the violent worlds of those with disabilities from the perspectives of practical theology and Anabaptism. It is a task to be carried out from the pulpit, Sunday school classes, small groups, and community involvement.

“I have been concerned in recent years about war and peace. I am troubled by the wall that separates the powerful from the powerless. We are in a dangerous time when wars can break out and kill many. This leads me to ask, ‘What is the role of our communities in this wounded world?’ This question leads me to think about the cry of people with disabilities.”¹ Jean Vanier wrote these words in response to a call for conversation around reconciliation. Being who he is, Jean Vanier naturally threw open the gates for the inclusion of all, including people with disabilities.

While the scope of this paper is not military conflict, it is looking at a war of sorts that is waged all around the world, in every community. Every day, people around the world are locked in battle being abused and victimized at the hands of violent perpetrators. This battle is often hidden in plain sight. It takes place in homes with trusted caregivers. My context has primarily been that of working with adolescents. In developing a response for unmaking violence in the worlds of adolescents, a process for the entire church was created. The ecclesial principles offered transcend any age group. What then is the role of our Christian communities in the wounded worlds of friends with disabilities indeed?

Statistics Regarding Abuse

Violence and abuse are realities in our world. In the United States in 2012, 678,810 unique children were substantiated as victims of abuse.² This is in distinction with the 3.8 million reports of abuse occurred in the United States (individual children may have multiple reports of abuse). For 2012, the unique victim rate works out to be 9.2 victims per 1,000 children in the population. This does not include the number of victims for whom no reporting took place.

¹ Hauwerwas, Stanley and Jean Vanier. *Living Gently in a Violent World: the prophetic witness of weakness*. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP: 2008), p. 59.

² Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Maltreatment*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2012, xi.

The good news is there has been a decrease in percentage of children being abused in recent years.³ 2010 ushered in the reauthorization of The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), (42 U.S.C. §5101), where the existing definition of child abuse and neglect was retained: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”⁴ The four categories accepted by most states are as follows: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect.

As terrible as the rates of abuse are in the general population, the rate of abuse dramatically increases when one or more disabilities are present with an individual. Sullivan and Knutson set the standard for conversations regarding the prevalence of abuse within populations accounting for disability. Their first study occurred in 1998 in a hospital setting.⁵ They found those with a disability were three times as likely to experience abuse as a typical child. Critiques of this study suggested the sample population was skewed, being a population already requiring medical attention. Addressing this critique, their subsequent study drew from the general population in a community.⁶ With a sample size over 50,000, they found a 9% prevalence rate of abuse among non-disabled children, compared to a rate of 31% for disabled children. Therefore, children with impairments were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than those without.⁷ The numbers are staggering. A child with a disability is more than three times as likely to experience violence in the forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as well as neglect. This does not begin to address the violence experienced regularly in the form of unwelcomed looks, unsolicited touches, taunts, name calling, and discrimination.

The role of Christian communities

The unmaking of violence demands a multifaceted approach. For the Christian, this unmaking of violence, or peacemaking, is the core of the gospel. It is the hallmark of Jesus’ presence with His disciples and so, too, should it be the hallmark of the church.⁸ The role of the Christian community is to intentionally take steps toward the unmaking of violence. Peacemaking demands that we address how to help restore those who have been violated. Yet it is not just about those who are helped. Those who enter into such sacred work will be changed themselves. Peacemaking also demands that we speak out and act out so that others are not newly violated.

³ Department of Health and Human Services, ii.

⁴ Ibid., ix.

For a look at the full report see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

⁵ P.M. Sullivan & J.F. Knutson, “The association between child maltreatment and disabilities in a hospital-based epidemiological study,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* vol. 22, 1998, 271-288.

⁶ P.M. Sullivan & J.F. Knutson, “Maltreatment and disabilities: a population based epidemiological study,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* vol. 24, 2000, 1257-1273.

⁷ K. Stalker & K. McArthur, “Child abuse, child protection and disabled children : a review of recent research,” *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 21, 2012, 32.

⁸ C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective*. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 240.

Finally, peacemaking requires that we are present for victims and offenders, realizing all have fallen short of the glory of God. Just as Jesus did not retaliate after being crucified on the cross, we too are to imitate and offer restoration even in the face of the most egregious offense and violence. Offering restoration is not the same as condoning a violent act. Consequences for violent actions are appropriate. Even still, proclaiming the prophetic call for the church as peacemakers is the true and right action.

Restoration: an Anabaptist response to violence.

We need to admit that we have not seen what is right in front of us. We need to open our eyes and ears to abuse and violence in our communities for people with disabilities. Those most impacted within the community for those with disabilities must have their stories heard. Once we are aware of their often violent world, we can advocate for change. Too often we stop at advocacy for the abused. Prevention too is a vital part of peacemaking. Finally, restoration is the unique privilege of the church calling for restoration of the individual as well as the community.

Witness: What it means to be human

How we decide what it means to be human helps to unpack the acceptance of violent behavior. Richard Dawkins recently tweeted that the only ethical choice a pregnant woman has upon learning her fetus has Down's syndrome is to abort.⁹ While Dawkins followed up his tweet with a longer nuanced response, he ends in the same place: people with disabilities bring suffering for themselves and others.¹⁰ He contends they are a liability on society. While not everyone agrees that those with disabilities are to be killed, they are still often seen as less than human. Additionally, the inability or reduced ability to articulate abuse they have experienced is viewed as an open door for those looking for victims.

The Christian community should offer an embodied theology. This theology articulates clearly the full humanity of those with disabilities, including their disabilities. In so doing it undoes a Docetic view where those with disabilities are seen as only appearing human, but are, in fact, sub-human, unworthy of the same rights and dignity offered to their typical peers. A theological anthropology that is anything less than inclusive of *all* people paves the way for violence. A theological anthropology must be an embodied theology where the body is viewed as unified, inseparable from the soul for a human to exist.

Embodied theology is critiqued as being an obstacle to fellowship with God. The critique says when we retain our identity via our particularities, ability included, we sublimate God's work in our lives. The rallying cry of this perspective is Galatians 3:28 where Paul declares 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Peter Rollins explains: 'This is not an expression of 'both/and,' in which we retain our identity when located in the new community of believers, but rather a neither/nor,' where we put aside those identities... what if the church Paul envisages in Galatians

⁹ Richard Dawkins. "Abortion & Down Syndrome: An Apology for the Letting Slip the Dogs of Twitterwar." Richard Dawkins Foundation. <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/08/abortion-down-syndrome-an-apology-for-letting-slip-the-dogs-of-twitterwar/>, (accessed on 13 September 2014).

¹⁰ Dawkins, "Abortion and Down Syndrome"

is one that calls into question the socio-symbolic identity of his readers’?¹¹ Rollins expresses concern that such an idea does violence to our particularity. But for Rollins, this violence is warranted and he believes were we to hold our particularities more loosely and realize they ultimately are to be released, the violence shifts focus to the injustices in the world.

This notion of sublimating all for a primary identity in Christ sounds so Christian! The difficulty is it also tells people it simply does not matter that God took the time to make you as you are: short/tall, dark or light, male or female, able bodied or disabled, that we are all just indiscriminate reflections of Christ. Rollins grounds this in kenosis, the theological term referring to “the ‘becoming nothing’ of Jesus in his life as a servant, as one who stood outside the power structures of his age.”¹² He invites Christians into corporate worship as a kenotic movement “where people are invited to suspend their interpretations of the world.”¹³ While this thought is admirable, the elimination of particularities stems from a privileged position.¹⁴ People with disabilities are daily reminded this world was not created for them. There is no illusion of privilege. Buildings are inaccessible, documents difficult or impossible to fill out, transportation blocked; the environment itself communicates that this world is for the typically abled. There is no room not to think about the particularity which they inhabit. For those with disabilities, the disability is both too important and not important enough to define them. It is an element of who they are but it is indeed an element. It cannot be cast aside without denying who they are.

Embodied theology must also be lived out, requiring actual, real time interactions with one another. It must be more than creedal statements or vague declarations. The church needs more than proximity to those with disabilities for violence to be prevented. Arne Vetlesen argues, “there is no necessary correlation between human proximity and moral conduct... Proximity interacts with a number of factors; it does not by itself bring about, does not by itself account for, moral conduct or lack of it.”¹⁵ We in the church must not only talk about including others, we must actually do so. Miroslav Volf discusses the inclusion of others at length in *Exclusion and Embrace*. As we seek to live an inclusive embodied theology we must understand “the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.”¹⁶ Moving relationships from hypothetical declarations to proximity to embrace is a process but one necessary to unmake violence. Further, Volf assumes “that the struggle against deception, injustice, and violence is indispensable” as the will to embrace becomes a priority.¹⁷

¹¹ Peter Rollins, “The Wordly Theology of Emerging Christianity,” *Church in the Present Tense: a candid look at what’s emerging*, Kevin Corcoran ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), 25.

¹² Rollins, 26.

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Amy Jacober “Adolescent Identity Development,” in *Christian Youth Work in Theory and Practice: a handbook*, edited by Sally Nash and Jo Whitehead (London: SCM Press, 2014), 93.

¹⁵ Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: an inquiry into the preconditions of moral performance*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994), 275.

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29.

¹⁷ Volf, 29.

The move from proximity to embrace establishes reciprocal relationships where those with disabilities aren't just tolerated but truly integrated. Their stories and testimonies both influence, and are influenced by, the life of the community. We must listen to the stories of friends with disabilities. Embrace may be seen when the testimony offered by a person with a disability is claimed as part of the community's testimony, rather than something outside of the community. Testimony is believed and not dismissed. The one giving and the ones receiving the testimony must reflect, and be changed as a result of the power of their story. The stories of those closest to people with disabilities also need to be heard and woven into the community. The depth of love, commitment, heartache, alienation, and tenacity remind the community not only that they are needed in the lives of others but they may too draw strength and be changed. It is in the testimonies, the witness of those close by that personal connections take place for many within the Christian community.

Advocate: To Speak for another

Few people would say they are comfortable with a teenager with Down's syndrome being raped but would not be moved to take action toward prevention. Once they know a teenager with Down's syndrome however, hear her story, and embrace her in community, her witness has the potential to change everything. Advocacy for one individual impacts circumstances for all. The advocacy the church is willing to do for one of her own, has the power to change the attitudes and values of numerous people. Advocacy for one you know is often the starting point.

What happens when I have no personal connection? When violence is not committed against me or someone I know? Listening is the first step in engaging when you are not personally impacted; allowing this to shape you. As embrace takes place, advocating for peace in the lives of people with disabilities. This advocacy needs to come from the church as a whole, including those directly and indirectly impacted by disability. The presence of the gospel requires the presence of peace. Biblical peace or shalom is much more robust than the absence of conflict. Perry Yoder offers a useful paradigm in which shalom requires three elements; 1) physical well being, including adequate food, shelter, clothing, and wealth, 2) a right relationship between and among people, and 3) the acquisition of virtue especially honesty and moral integrity.¹⁸ Peace is not a passive state of being. It is a volitional act. It brings about restoration through means of justice. "God's justice makes things right by transforming the status quo of need and oppression into a situation where things are as they should be... peacemaking means working for the realization of shalom justice which is necessary for shalom."¹⁹ "Justice in the sense of shalom presupposes God's intent for the community or society. It is in community where the weak are to be strengthened by the strong. It is in community where those who lack are provided for by those with plenty. It is the ultimate community to be restored to right relationship with God."²⁰

Prevent: To Deny Opportunity for future abuse

Prevention means speaking out before anything happens. It means saying, from the pulpit, in

¹⁸ Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace* (Winnepeg, MB: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 130.

¹⁹ Yoder, 34.

²⁰ Amy Jacober, *A Practical Theology of Youth Ministry* (PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003), 219.

Bible study, songs, and blogs that abuse is unacceptable. The way of Jesus is an active peacemaking. It means empowering potential victims to know they do not deserve to be treated in violent ways. It means letting potential offenders know violent actions toward anyone, people with disabilities included, are unacceptable. It means getting involved with our communities, being active in policymaking that protects the human dignity of all. Peacemaking is an active process. “Some are still concerned that injustice may flourish until forceful action is taken and are not yet fully persuaded that nonviolent intervention is as effective as its proponents claim. Others till confuse pacifism with “passivism.”²¹ If shalom, as described by Yoder, is to take place it must be intentional. The final four steps of Glen Stassen’s seminal work *Just Peacemaking* offers pragmatic insight.²² In the first Stassen says we must “seek human rights and justice for all, especially the powerless, without double standards. The lack of human rights is itself the absence of peace, holistically understood as shalom.”²³ Violence comes when human rights have been ignored or deprived. Secondly, he cites “the need for realistic acknowledgement of the vicious cycles we are caught up in, and in our need to participate in a realistic peacemaking process.”²⁴ The third step is “instead of judgmental propaganda, we can acknowledge to others that we have caused hurt and want to take actions to do better.”²⁵ Stassen’s final step is to “participate in groups with accurate information and a voice in policy-making.”²⁶ Each makes a little move toward unmaking violence.

Restore: To Make Whole Again

Restoration is a necessary step in making peace. This restoration manifests in our relationship with God, our relationships with others, and in the restoration of our very identities. Victims of violence need restoration on multiple levels. Foremost, they need their own wholeness restored and a reminder of their worth and dignity as human beings. They also need restoration to take place between themselves and God. The church is the tangible reminder for victims of violence that God is on the side of the disenfranchised and oppressed. The church should be the one place where there is no doubt that anyone of any ability will find embrace and community.

The goal of justice too can be that of restoration. While justice is more often known as retributive, attributive, or distributive, there is another option. Restorative justice holds that victims and offenders have the possibility of transformation in their lives. “Retributive theory believes pain will vindicate, but in practice that is often counterproductive for both the victim and offender. Restorative justice theory...argues that what truly vindicates is acknowledgement of victims’ harms and needs, combined with an effort to encourage offenders to take responsibility, make right the wrongs, and address the cause of their behavior. By addressing this need for vindication in a positive way, restorative justice has the potential to affirm both victim

²¹ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist : the bare essentials of a radical faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 128.

²² The first three steps of Stassen’s peacemaking process are focused on interaction with offenders and / or the international community. They are less directly applicable in this situation.

²³ Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: transformed initiatives for justice and peace*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 103.

²⁴ Stassen, 104.

²⁵ Ibid., 107.

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

and offender and to help transform their lives.”²⁷ Holocaust survivor David Gil set his work about restoration in the realm of policy. He believed if Christians would actually make peace as Jesus did, restoration would be inevitable. Gil argues “Were critical consciousness to spread widely among significant majorities of people, from local to global levels, humankind could eliminate prevailing conditions of injustice and oppression.”²⁸ This means there will be moments of extremely difficult terrain to navigate. There is a high rate of correlation *and* causation between those who have been abused and then become abusers themselves. In this sense they are both victim and offender. In some cases, the community must navigate the process of restoration including consequences.

Conclusion

Even in the unmaking of various types of violence, we ourselves may do violence if we do not witness the abuse of, and advocate for, our friends with special needs. Their lives are fraught with violence in overt and subtle ways. Even when we accept them into our communities, we must open our eyes wider and unstop our ears to see and hear the abuse in which they live. Then, when we have become witnesses, we can begin to unmake violence in their context with them. Because in order to unmake violence everywhere, we must include those who literally may not be able to speak for themselves.

²⁷ Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2002), 59.

²⁸ David Gil, *Confronting Injustice and Oppression: concepts and strategies for social workers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 49.

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