Roots of violence

by L. Gregory Jones in the July 15, 1998 issue

Jonesboro, Paducah, Springfield. These towns have become synonymous with random youth killings in schools. Close to two dozen people have been killed in school shootings over the past two years, many more have been injured, and thousands have been emotionally scarred by the trauma.

We search for ways to explain such events. We need to understand these events as best we can, to try to make sense of the senseless acts that threaten our identity. We do so to honor the memory and the suffering of those who died or were injured. In addition, we do so hoping to learn some lessons that might diminish the likelihood of future Jonesboros.

We do so even though, as Christians, we recognize that explanations for sin always fall short. Loving God makes sense; turning away from God and our neighbor, and turning in on ourselves, does not. How else can we account for the fact that we continue to sin, even when we know it diminishes ourselves and others?

It is impossible fully to know how and why these events happened. But several compelling analyses have identified important contributing factors. One of the most obvious is the easy accessibility of guns in our culture, and our fascination with them. We have failed to develop sensible policies about gun control. Charlton Heston, the new president of the National Rifle Association, responded to the recent rash of school shootings with the following observation: the perpetrators "are already career criminals, or trembling on the brink." It is almost laughable to hear an 11-year-old Arkansas boy described in these terms, but Heston's comments reveal the cynicism that undermines our public discourse about guns. We seem unable to learn even the most obvious lessons.

A second factor is our culture's fascination with violence. I have no doubt that the prevalence of violence in the media significantly affects both our tendencies toward violence and our tolerance of it. I notice it in myself, and I have watched it in my own kids. It only took watching one episode of *Power Rangers* to discover that it encouraged my boys, then seven and four, to interact in much more violent ways.

The recurring images of violence--on television, in movies, in music--shape our imaginations and cultivate aggressive passions that lead to our own violent outbursts.

Closely related to media violence is a third factor: imitative violence. There seems little doubt that each of the school killings has provided an opportunity for copycats. This is not to say that the motives and circumstances in each of the recent episodes were identical. Yet each successive episode seems to have been affected by the spectacle of earlier killings.

This kind of imitation goes well beyond the recent wave of shootings in schools. René Girard has suggested that mimetic violence is woven into the fabric of human culture and into each human being's earliest experiences with desire. We desire what we cannot have, and we want to have it. Our acquisitive desire leads us into violence.

My reflections on the school killings have been shaped partly by Girard's reflections and partly by my own experience as a parent. After all, my oldest child is the same age--11--as one of the two perpetrators of the killings in Jonesboro. As I reflected on whether I could imagine my children becoming violent in this way, I worried about each of the factors described above. Yet I was also haunted by the recognition that we can never fully explain why we sin in the particular ways we do. I cannot guarantee that my children will not become violent. Yet how do we raise them so as to minimize the risk?

Girard believes that the crucified and risen Christ offers the antidote to mimetic violence. Christ refuses to be drawn into our destructive cycles of violence. Even though our violence nails Jesus to the cross, he refuses to retaliate. The risen Christ offers a judgment of grace, a judgment that does not condemn those who killed him but offers life in God's new creation. This new creation is to be embodied in communities whose practices reflect the gracious and peaceable character of God's reign.

Yet cultivating such communities requires more of Christians than many of us have wanted to acknowledge. The African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child" is, Christianly understood, a reminder that it takes a church to raise a Christian child. But some of the most powerful forces shaping our children often appear to be antithetical to Christian discipleship.

Physically gifted kids discover a temporary satisfaction of their desires through the adulation that comes with team sports. Physically attractive kids discover a temporary satisfaction of their desires through sexual activity. Affluent kids discover a temporary satisfaction of their desires through acquiring material goods that represent the latest in status symbols. Unfortunately, but in some sense not unexpectedly, kids who do not fit in, kids who have been victims of the exclusionary tactics so typical of adolescent relations, too often turn to violence--either projected outward, in acts of aggression, or inward, through depression and suicide.

Do we teach our children what is worth living for? Dying for? Do we school them, as we ourselves need to be schooled, in imitation of the crucified and risen Christ? What practices of Christian community do we need to cultivate for youth that draws them into imitation that nurtures love for God and neighbor? Can those practices provide a sense of adventure powerful enough to counteract other forces that tempt us?

The series of youth school killings should serve as a wake-up call. I hope that, among other things, it can awaken us to the need to provide a deeper sense of Christian identity and discipleship for our kids, and for ourselves.