Ordinary violence

Peacemaking is a crucial part of the Christian life—but it isn’t just about war.

by Myles Werntz in the July 2023 issue

(Illustration by Enrique Quintero)

The origin story of my pacifism will be familiar to many Americans my age. I was 23 years old on September 11, 2001. I had grown up firmly middle-class and had lived, up to that point, in relatively small, safe places in Louisiana and Arkansas. I had not imagined that violence was a part of my everyday existence until the door to my 8 a.m. seminary class opened and we were commanded to turn on the television. Suddenly the distance between my college town and the world shortened.

The question of how to be a Christian peacemaker entered my world in an international frame, bundled with terms like *insurgents* and *terrorism* and with concerns about how countries and political movements related to one another. As a seminarian, the only resource I had for responding to the claim of violence was the words of Jesus ringing in my ears: “Love your enemies.” After watching the towers fall, this teaching seemed ludicrous.

Those committed to Christian nonviolence have often worked within an international frame. Late 20th-century activists and theologians such as Glen Stassen and more recent Catholic movements such as Just Peace have offered answers; Christian Peacemaker Teams (now Community Peacemaker Teams) went into situations of open conflict to mediate warring parties. But by asking only what Christian peacemaking might say to international violence, I was missing something important. Violence is not a question of what happens “out there”; violence is a deeply intimate feature of all times and places.

The ancient world was filled with cosmogonies in which the world is, down to its founding, an act of violence: the Babylonian god Marduk slays Tiamat and fashions the world from the goddess’s body; Odin destroys the giant Ymir and creates the oceans from the great giant’s blood. By contrast, Genesis depicts violence as not original to the world but something that emerges after sin has taken root. Yet Genesis is clear to show as well that violence is not first an international reality: it appears not as something “out there” in the disputed space between Israel and the Hittites, but within the folds of our ordinary lives. Violence appears silently as animals are lovingly raised only to be slaughtered; it appears as the culmination of a grudge between brothers, stalking through the grass until it erupts in the fields. What begins for Genesis in intimate ways will eventually become larger than individual lives: the violence of Cain becomes the legend of Lamech and the family rivalries between Israel and Edom.

Focusing on the clash of international relations deceives us by presenting violence as exceptional, when scripture wants us to see it as the often invisible irritant within our everyday lives. This kind of violence, out of which international conflicts emerge, is what some writers have called “ordinary violence” or “slow violence”; it enters into our imaginations and relationships in normalized patterns, and only over time does it become something more visible and chaotic. Ordinary violence is exhibited, the Torah tells us, in the ways in which people do economic injustice—or rather, perform economic violations against one another—which then give way to murder.

Ordinary violence is seen, the Proverbs tell us, when we abuse our families and strangers.

And yet for much of the 20th century Christian thinkers talked about war as if it were an exceptional state of violence. It is not that people were ignorant of the ways in which domestic abuse or child labor or poverty destroyed lives; it was that violence was largely viewed as a category that occurs outside the bounds of ordered relationships, personal or international.

After that early morning class in 2001, watching the towers collapse, I drove in a daze back to my rented house close to campus. It was a house where my car would be broken into more times than I could count, where my bike would be stolen, where yells and intimate violence could be heard piercing the quiet night air. Frequently, when I left my house to walk to campus, there would be someone asleep in the front yard or laid out on the walkway spanning the highway between my house and campus.

I lived there not out of some deep desire to be present to poverty but because it was what I could afford. It was a place full of warm neighbors and everyday violence, the kind which prepares us over time to accept greater violence as necessary. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, the power dynamics of international relations begin at home, learned in intimacy before they are implemented globally.

But even if I were to have slept in a different house, in a different neighborhood, with a different income, I would not have escaped what Genesis's picture of violence unpacks. The food that I ate required the death of other creatures; the electricity I consumed was funded by oil companies that contribute to the slow degradation of the earth; the clothes I wore were provided by people in faraway lands who were paid too little and subjected to degrading labor conditions. These little forms of violence, as I would learn much later from Óscar Romero, were violences that the poor suffer; they often remain invisible to those outside such spaces. The violence of the spectacle of planes crashing and buildings collapsing, of tyrants assaulting civilians, of refugees fleeing from civil war—these are all magnifications of ordinary dynamics in which the world fractures and refractures itself.

Recognizing the connection between ordinary grievances and large-scale destruction can lead us to see power distortions everywhere. We might be tempted toward

paralysis. There are many across the 20th century who have claimed, for example, that the teachings of Jesus on violence could not be taken seriously in a complex world of power politics. But instead of learning this lesson from the brutalities of modern war, what if a different lesson were called for: that war and ordinary life are in fact connected, and that this calls for not just our battlefields but our ordinary lives to be a constant life of repentance and repair?

The way in which the possibility of peacemaking emerged into the public consciousness of many after 2001 was as an impossibility: that which must be done as an act of faith in the face of brutal facts. But if ordinary violence and its extraordinary flowering are linked, then peacemaking has a place not only within war—as medics and chaplains, as refugee coordinators and translators and treaty negotiators—but also in everyday life, as those who see the ordinary violence of poverty, domestic abuse, hunger, and racism as the precursors to something which ascends into a more complex and destructive action.

The immediate work of binding up wounds, of shielding the vulnerable, and of beating swords into plowshares is always in high demand; such work, particularly in conflicts, is necessary if there is to be a world in which peace can be built. But wars do not simply erupt: they do not come ex nihilo into the world as events without causes. The ordinary violence which the world suffers from, frequently unseen or unnamed as such, is the first fruits, the building blocks, of the greater violence to come.

There is a place for Christian peacemaking in international conflicts. Our faith can help us to ask and answer questions about what sanctions accomplish or how negotiators work for truces. But any vision of Christian peacemaking must turn its attention as well toward violence in the ordinary. By attending to our domestic relationships, to poverty, to the small ways in which our neighbors become our enemies, ordinary violence is met with an ordinary practice—more akin to habit than heroism. The suffering of war calls us into action. But to name war as a world apart from the ordinary will not do. Breaking this link does damage to the soldier, whose wartime life is suspended in a no-man’s-land utterly divorced from their ordinary life, and to the civilian, who is rendered unable to see the connection between the violence chosen daily and the horrors of war.

It is with good reason that the extraordinary injunction of Jesus against striking an enemy and in favor of turning the other cheek is followed by a rather ordinary

command: to make peace with one’s neighbor before offering a sacrifice at the altar. The two acts of reconciliation are not separated as one would separate the night from the day; they are shades of light in different dark spaces, with the actions of ordinary peacemaking preparing us for the next unspeakable violence. The practice alters our hearts and habits over time so that in the moment of decision, we are inclined toward peacemaking and not toward striking back.

What good does preparation for future conflicts do us in this present moment, when Russian tanks are decimating Ukrainian civilians? Far from deferring action, this vision of the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary gives us more tools for addressing the conflict at hand, in two important ways. First, this connection helps us to remember that how we make peace in the extraordinary will set the stage for what peace we will be able to make in ordinary times. The postbellum—how we end wars—is as important as how we fight them. The stakes are high for ending conflicts well: our present enemy is tomorrow’s neighbor. Second, this connection between ordinary and extraordinary gives us new sets of tactics to draw on for peacemaking—the diplomatic and the relational, international treaties and the shared histories and common heritages of the combatants, arms reductions and locally appropriate reparations.

Understanding the connection between ordinary and extraordinary violence builds up our responses in times of war. It also calls Christians of all persuasions to a fuller accounting of our faith. For those inclined toward peacemaking as an international action, the connection is a chastening one, keeping us attuned toward the manifold ways peacemaking is an ongoing work in our daily lives. Those who have committed to peacemaking in ordinary life can continue to embrace it as a fragile and frequently broken venture, living into our commitment in times of global conflict, even when no outcome is clean. A peace which bears the name of the incarnation—reconciling both things above and things below—can attempt no less.