

This past Monday I had lunch with a colleague and we began discussing the problem of violence.

I think we all can agree that violence is bad.

The disagreements start shortly thereafter as to what is just harmless fun, what constitutes dangerous violence and what must be avoided at all costs.

I'm being obtuse. My colleague quickly pointed out to me the pervasiveness of violence in our culture. If you think of it, we begin encountering violence at an early age. As soon as the anvil hits Wile E. Coyote's head we have our first encounters with violence. And interestingly, the crushed skull of Wile E. always reinflates and everything is fine.

You can take a riff on this and cover most of children's cartoons, at least the ones I remember. Tomcat, the original one, regularly falls victim to the machinations of Jerry and whatever the bulldog's name is. Bugs Bunny sticks his finger in the end of Elmer Fudd's shotgun and rather than blowing his hand off, it explodes in Fudd's face.

But surely there is a far cry from the harmless violence of Warner Bros. to the pornographic violence of the most problematic, adult only rated video games.

The last time I was in Charlotte I stayed with my sister and her family. My nephew wanted me to play Super Mario Brothers with him. It's about the only thing that carries over from my childhood to his, so we did. After it was time for him to go to bed, my sister and I stayed up to close to 2 a.m. trying to beat the various levels of the video game, shooting fireballs at the goombas, those little video creatures, stomping on their heads, and using whatever other tricks we could to decimate their population and I can assure you, we bear no moral scars for the goomba carnage that was left in our wake.

We know the difference, I think, between what is harmless and what is fatal. Only a moralistic pedant would equate harmless children's games with the soul-consuming problem of gun violence and the corporate killing of endless war.

We know the difference between harmless and fatal, but what about everything in between?

We know the difference, but where is the fine line between harmless teasing and deplorable bullying?

We know the difference between harmless and fatal, but when does a courageous act cease to be a protective act and turn instead to vindictiveness?

We may very well not be able to answer these questions today. I am by no means assured that Christian faith means we always know that what we are doing is the best path or even the most righteous path, but can rest in the assurance that in following Jesus we may at least seek the better way.

In order to have some framework around our thinking today, it may be helpful once again to break the problem down into component parts. These aren't exhaustive, but perhaps we can think of violence as a cognitive problem, then a verbal problem, and finally a physical problem.

Let's start with cognitive violence.

I am not a hundred percent certain that this sermon will pass philosophical, logical muster because I'm not one hundred percent certain that we can universalize this claim, but when I speak of cognitive violence, I am thinking of the ways in which we put categories in place to understand the world in which we live. A certain amount of categorization is understandable, perhaps even necessary just to get by. What I mean by this is, for

example, that I'm here at Morningside, you're here at Morningside, and together we make a claim about what we believe. Say it's our commitment to hospitality and welcome. By being part of the same group, we can generalize a claim that we see the biblical mandate to hospitality with some degree of commonality. There's nothing wrong with that. We share together a common value. It unites us.

We do this in all manner of matters.

What becomes problematic is when the categories become a way of reinforcing otherness.

There's nothing wrong with believing that fellow Morningsiders share a common value of hospitality. But if we in turn heard that – I'll just make this up – that the members of Podunk Episcopalian Church have taken to baptizing cats and here at Morningside, we question the wisdom of baptizing cats.

But then if we in turn generalize that Episcopalians baptize cats we would head down a very wrong, very unhelpful path.

And if we decided that the Episcopalians were, in turn, unclean because of their liturgically suspect practice of baptizing cats, we've spun out of control.

And yes, I do get that there is absolutely everything in the world wrong with that analogy, but my point is this: whatever violence happens in the world, it begins with cognitive violence.

We make wrong assumptions. We divide the world into like and not like.

And then when physical violence happens it is the tragic living out of that cognitive violence.

It will take a trial to determine guilt in the Trayvon Martin case, but it wouldn't be too great a stretch to think that somewhere in this tragic altercation, there was cognitive violence that preceded the physical violence.

It's not accidental that when Jesus told this story of senseless violence on the Jericho road he used as his object lesson a man who would have been seen as decidedly *other*.

Good sense may on occasion necessitate a differentiation between self and other, but probably not as often as we think.

And it generally starts off innocently enough. My siblings and I can remember riding with my wonderful grandmother – this was back when electric door locks were a big deal in cars, and as we were riding down the road, clearly going 45 miles an hour or so, whenever my grandmother saw someone who seemed the least bit suspicious, she would reflexively press the button on the door of her Oldsmobile to be sure the doors were locked. Those locks were as loud as a shotgun blast. 45 miles per hour, and bam. It was an easy aural cue: like, and not like, self and other.

It's cognitive violence because if we are wrong, we are doing violence to the humanity of whomever we're creating our working generalizations about.

We don't know people for who they are, we know them for who we think they are. That reduces them, and ultimately, it reduces us. Remember that to be truly human is to be made for good relationship with God and with neighbor.

It's no wonder that when Jesus told the story of the merciful traveler, it was an outsider who helped.

Jesus called us to the ministry of the reconciliation of the world. Perhaps that reconciliation starts in our heads.

Monitor your thoughts. Check them for faithfulness to God's call to reconciliation.

Remember Jesus' teaching to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbors. In so doing, we recover a little bit of our humanity.

Sometimes our thoughts spill out of our mouths.

When what spills out of our mouths is the overflowing of love, it's a wonderful thing to hear.

Most of the time, what spills out of our mouths is neither helpful nor harmful.

Some of the time, what spills out is the cognitive violence given voice.

Not too long ago I was watching television and I saw one of those NBC news specials that highlighted the problem of bullying.

They had test-cases where good kids were put in a room with bullying actors. It was amazing to see what happened.

Almost all of the kids struggled with what to do. Peer pressure overwhelmed some, others simply held back and a small minority were secure enough in themselves to speak out on behalf of the one who was being verbally violated.

Bullying, we hear, has reached epidemic proportions. It's verbal violence.

I have a hard time justifying the mindset of innocent school rites of passage. I also have a hard time throwing young people under the jail for bad judgment. So here is my meddling word for parents and it is the same meddling word that I have for bosses and it is the same meddling word I have for kids:

Be mindful of what goes in your head for fear it will come out of your mouth.

Words can hurt or words can heal. We have a twenty-four hour entertainment cycle wherein words fill the air, sometimes masquerading as news, sometimes as entertainment.

There is not an excuse for listening to words that hurt. It is poison in your brain. When we hear the diminishment of the humanity of any person for any reason, know it for the sin that it is.

Bullying has to have a context to become epidemic. I am sure that it is not remotely coincidental that the rise of false outrage as entertainment appears at the same time as a problem with bullying.

Mind your thoughts, because they may spill out of your mouth.

Mind your mouth because it may motivate action.

Remember Jesus' teaching to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our minds and all our strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Finally we come to the problem of physical violence.

And in this instance, I have to confess my rank hypocrisy in that I remember two violent acts in my life with no small measure of pride.

The first is the time as an adolescent when I finally knocked the kid who had been shoving me in gym into the following week. Only the fear of having to stand in the lunchroom as an inmate of in-school suspension kept me from leaping on him to exact my revenge once it became clear that it had, in fact, worked.

The second was the one and only bar-brawl I have ever participated in, which occurred when I was in seminary, of all places, when a very drunken Princeton Graduate student kept trying to touch a woman in our group in inappropriate and unwelcome ways.

Another classmate of mine and I stepped in between and he shoved and I shoved back. It helps if you have to shove someone if they are intoxicated. They fall easily and you become a hero in your own mind.

I confess these because they seemed so incredibly justifiable. They still do.

And that's the problem with physical violence – so often it seems justifiable.

Very rarely are we violent for enjoyment. That would be sociopathic. No, the sin of violence must be more seductive.

We are, after all, civilized people. Therefore violence must seem to arise out of necessity.

And yet the violence we do to others does violence to our humanity... Indeed, remember what God made us to be: for communion with God and with each other. And Jesus reminded us yet again, what it means to be in communion with neighbor.

Indeed, our calling to humanity may seem impossible. Paul makes it worse when he writes, “render to no one evil for evil... never avenge yourselves, leave room for God’s wrath... live peaceably with all.”

About the only part of that which seems easy is to feed our enemies because Paul tells us that in so doing we will heap burning coals on their heads. I can identify with that part. The rest seems impossible.

And yet. And yet.

We worship the prince of peace.

We read of God’s vision for the peaceable kingdom, you know wolves and lambs lying down together, children and snakes playing together and no one gets hurt.

All of that peaceable kingdom stuff sounds like so much nonsense until we remember that it is God’s vision for us.

This was originally going to be the war sermon. I have one from years ago from way back when the war in Iraq started.

But war is simply violence on a larger scale. The lessons hold. Thoughts lead to words lead to actions.

But I know as well that life tumbles in. War happens whether we want it to or not sometimes, and sometimes despite our greatest protestations.

I remember well a story I heard a while back of the return of a military brigade to the town that sponsored it during the middle ages. As the word arrived that the brigade was coming home, the townspeople lined the streets up the main road into the village, up the hill, to the cathedral. As the weary warriors entered the city, they marched resolutely past their silent fellow villagers. Finally they reached the doors on the cathedral and entered. The townspeople filed in behind and together, collectively, the soldiers and their town confessed their sin and sought God's forgiveness. And only then, after acknowledging the sin of war, did the celebrations begin. That is the right posture of the Christian toward war. That is the right posture of the Christian toward violence.

You see violence is not the way it's supposed to be.

Mind your thoughts, they become words. Mind your words, they lead to action.

Let me close with a quotation a friend of mind reminded me of not too long ago, from Philo of Alexandria. He said, "Be kind. For everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

That battle, my friend said, is to hold on to our humanity.

Indeed it is. It is our humanity that God has called to reconcile the world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.