

Pentecost 4 (Proper 7 Yr B)
Mark 4: 35-41
Fear, Guns and Dinosaur Brains
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Blessed be the name of God

I need to address the mass killing that recently occurred in Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, and today's Gospel lesson about the crossing of the Sea of Galilee gives us the chance to think about that... in terms of Fear, Guns, and Dinosaur Brains.

By Dinosaur Brains, I don't mean the grey matter of Brontosauri, but that part of the human brain matter that lies deep within the Neo-cortex and the Limbic System...that part of the brain known as the cerebellum

One theory of human development holds that each part of the brain represents a different evolutionary level of humankind. Each is connected to each other by nerves but operate autonomously. Under duress, we may shut down the outer parts of our brains—where reasoning resides—and resort only on our reptilian brain, which only has two alternatives: fight or flight.

At the same time, our reptilian brain, the cerebellum, is the repository of the basic assumptions we have about how the world should work. Moreover these assumptions cannot be touched by rational argument because they are non-rational, deeply felt, and most-often, based on fear.

We see an example of these deeply held beliefs in today's gospel from Mark, when Jesus says, "Let's climb in the boat and go to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee, to the Decapolis, the ten cities where the Gentiles live]."

This statement, no doubt, set off the synapses deep within the dinosaur brains of the disciples, deep within that fearful part of their brains...all of which arose from the deep fears ancient desert people had about large bodies of water.

It's a fear that arose out of the creation stories.

Large bodies of water represented the chaos that existed before creation, and only the power of God was able to tame that chaos, when God created the firmament (which held back the waters of the heavens) and the earth (which held back the waters under the deep).

Large bodies of water also were to be feared because they recalled how the wrath of God brought about the death of almost all of humankind.

When God became angry, as the disciples well knew from the story of Noah, God opened the windows of heaven and the springs of the deep and released the water of chaos to destroy the earth

And additionally, and just as fearfully, the Sea of Galilee was there for a God-given purpose: it separated the world of the Jews and that of the Gentiles. On the one side lied security and the law of the Torah, on the other, idolatry

and orgies. Staying on your own side of the boundary was the *Natural Order of Things*.

And sure enough, what happened when Jesus crossed from one side to the other?

The Natural Order was disrupted and the result was wind and storm and chaos and waves that threatened to sink the boat.

Well, we might think that all this fear might only apply to the disciples and those ancient peoples who didn't have the benefits of modern technology and a scientific understanding of the real Natural Order of Things.

But just like the ancient Jews, we in the modern USA have our own deeply held beliefs in our collective dinosaur brains. Here are my Top 10 in the Natural Order of Things that we know to be true. [See if you can fill in the blanks...]:

10. Food that falls on the floor is OK to eat if you pick it up in... 5 seconds.
9. Egyptians & Aztecs didn't build the pyramids on their own; they were helped by ...space aliens. (The Learning Channel)
8. God helps those who...help themselves. (Ben Franklin, not Deuteronomy)
9. There are 50 million undocumented immigrants in the USA, and are here only to commit terrorism, murder and rape. (Ann Coulter & the Donald)
6. Winning isn't everything...it's the only thing. (Vince Lombardi)
5. Speak softly and...carry a big stick. (TR)
4. Sometimes we have to destroy a city...to save it. (Ben Tre, Vietnam; Fallujah, in Anbar Province)
3. The best defense...is a good offense. [Or, as we were told by various foreign policy specialists, the best defense against violence is the capacity & and the willingness to inflict overwhelming violence (RAND Corp: Mutually Assured Destruction nuclear policy)].
2. The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun...is a good guy with a gun. [Wayne La Pierre of the NRA].
1. *Have Gun Will Travel* is the card of a man; a knight without armor in a savage land; his fast gun for hire heeds the calling wind. A soldier of fortune is a man called.... Paladin.

And there we have it: the Number One Deep-Seated Conviction of the collective dinosaur brain of many American children and adults.

One hundred and twenty-five years of dime novels, movies, radio and TV shows about gun slingers and sharp shooters and bandoliers and banditos have told us, over and over again, deep within our dinosaur brains, that the Colt .45 Peacemaker was the instrument by which we settled the Old West.

Is that really true? No, it's horsefeathers! The West was won by the John Deere cast steel plow: "The plow that won the west"

But our dinosaur brains are still convinced that there are outlaws, and Pawnee Indians and claim jumpers and rustlers that needed to be shot, and those same kinds of enemies are still out there today, and all those fears have convinced us that now—with all the new and improved forms of bad guys all around us—is not the time to join the rest of the civilized world in basic gun control.

And what does that give us?

According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, we average 32,000 deaths annually from firearms & average two non-fatal injuries for each death¹.

That's 88 deaths per day. In one year, the body count equals twice the population of Anacortes. At that rate it would only take 3¾ years to kill off the entire population of Skagit County from the Puget Sound to the summit of the North Cascades Highway.

And yet, all these facts—all this body count—doesn't make any difference.

Because we're talking logic to dinosaur brains. Because we know that, in the Natural Order of Things, might makes right, and those with the biggest might have got the biggest rights...And, besides; what if I wake up in the middle of the night and I hear somebody strange in the hallway...I need to defend myself!!

So what would Jesus say to our dinosaur brains and our Top 10 List of the Natural Order of Things?

First of all, we might get some insight about this if we look at today's lesson of Jesus calming the winds and the sea.

Jesus says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" and to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? After all you've seen, you still have no faith?"

Not only is he speaking to the storm (the hostile forces that arose when Jesus disturbed the Natural Order of Things), Jesus also speaks to the reptilian part of the disciples' brains, to all the different forms of mistrust and fears that controlled their lives.

Jesus, throughout his life, was the Interrupter of the Natural Order of Things, he was the Disrupter of the Cycle of Violence.

Our reptilian brain tells us that we must use violence to protect ourselves from violence, but Jesus came to help us evolve from that dinosaur brain; he came to teach us through his nonviolent life, to teach us by his forgiving his enemies, to teach us by his resurrection from the dead, that we are not creatures who need to live in fear and that violence is not the answer.

And yet, despite all this, I still have a Smith & Wesson .357 magnum pistol in my house, given to me by my brother, formerly the Command Sergeant Major of the Colorado State Patrol, who wore it for many years, and who

¹ Firearm & Injury Center at Penn (ficap@uphs.upenn.edu) (version 2009)

reckoned that—now that I had returned to the USA from my time overseas—I needed something with which to defend myself when the Canadians started pouring across the border.

Now, I know, deep within my dino brain, that there is only one reason to have a gun: that's to kill somebody who's threatening me. And I also know that I am not being threatened in Anacortes. I have been stationed and flown into some very exotic countries in my life...but when's the last time I had to use a gun to defend myself? 41 years ago in Cambodia...and we were at war.

Let's just take a look at this Smith and Wesson .375 magnum revolver. It's a work of art, with engraving and exquisite workmanship. It's worthy of display in a shadowbox or on its own altar.

But, in reality—as we treasure this and hold this and put it on the mantel shelf or safely in a drawer—this has become the purest form of an idol, surpassing the Golden Calf.

Like any idol, it promises that as long as I have it, it will provide safety and security. It promises to protect my home, my neighborhood, my nation and my world of evildoers (and sorry about the collateral damage).

Yet this is not just a powerless idol that is hung over the mantelpiece and does nothing...No, it is much more special than that. This gives us the God-like power to take life.

And just like any other idol, it requires that we give sacrifices to it. It requires human sacrifice. (32,000 per year, at last count.)

So it comes as no surprise that J. Warren Cassidy the former executive vice-president of the National Rifle Association said to Time magazine, "You would get a far better understanding if you approached us like you were approaching one of the great religions."

If carrying a gun is considered to be a religious practice...well, you know how futile it to try to convert someone from their deeply held religious beliefs. There are no logical arguments that you can make that will convince someone that their faith is in vain.

I've had a long discussion about this after dinner on Friday with my visiting 16 year-old granddaughter Kristina, who is a big 2nd Amendment person. Her bottom line is this: "There's nothing you can do about it; you're just going to make people mad when you threaten to take away their guns."

So, let's assume that the gun issue is like religion, and if we will not be able to convert anyone from their beliefs, we can at least try to become more ecumenical.

Perhaps we can find some common ground by which we can reduce the violence.

I believe that most of us believe that there exists broad agreement among people who own guns and those that don't that there are some common sense measures that would save lives while protecting the right of law-abiding people to bear arms.

The United Church of Christ made an attempt to find some of this common ground in a resolution made at 1995's 20th General Synod. This resolution called for legislation to strengthen licensing and registration of gun sales, to strengthen regulations of gun dealers and to ban semiautomatic assault weapons and high capacity ammunition clips.

In the Episcopal Church, we have *Bishops United Against Gun Violence*, a group which includes Bishop Greg and Bishop Sandy among its members. *Bishops United* has broadened the UCC's common sense measures and has called for expanding federal background checks system to cover gun shows, internet and commercial sales; making gun trafficking a federal crime; encouraging the use of "smart gun" technology to reduce accidental shootings—especially among children; requiring that guns be stored safely; and improving access to mental healthcare for all Americans.

Yet, all these calls for action on gun control are still just rational arguments about guns.

The love of this idol is not rational or subject to reason, and I believe it won't be removed by strictly working on those "common sense" measures.

The issue of guns is like the issue that occurred when Jesus came down the Mount of the Transfiguration and found his disciples were completely unsuccessful in casting out a demon from a boy who was rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth. (This is boy who's father said, "I believe; help me in my unbelief.")

Jesus issued a command to the demon: "Listen up, you no-talking, no-hearing demon. I Myself am ordering you to come out of him now. Come out and don't ever come back."²

A "no-talking, no-hearing demon" ...What an appropriate description of our dinosaur brain.

The disciples later ask Jesus, "Why couldn't we cast out that unclean spirit?"

Jesus answered, "That sort of powerful spirit can only be conquered with much prayer."

The love of this idol, of our weaponry, I'm convinced, will only be overcome when there is an inner healing, an exorcism, which will only come by much prayer, by which we will be led to free ourselves of the limitations of our dinosaur brains.

I've been praying about what I should do about my Smith & Wesson .357 magnum, and in response to those prayers, I'm going to box up this gun and return it to my brother.

I did have another thought for it, for which I've have spoken to blacksmith Paul Thorne, and he would have been glad to melt this down in his forge and turn it into a garden tool...swords into plowshares; gun into garden trowel.

² *The Voice* translation

But that would be unfair to my brother...who would probably drive out to Anacortes and do unspeakable things to me with that garden tool

Yet, setting aside my brother and his gun, I do see some signs of progress:

I understand that the mass murder committed at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston may have been motivated by the hope that the parishioners and the black community would rise up and retaliate in an Armageddon-like race war.

But that didn't happen, and that is certainly because the family members of those who were slain were followers of Jesus, the Disrupter of the Cycle of Violence. They didn't hunker down in fear or strike out in revenge. Instead they proved themselves to be the true believers of Jesus, the Interrupter of the Natural Order of Things.

I see hope in the words of Bethane Middleton-Brown to the killer of her sister, the Reverend DePayne Middleton-Doctor: "We have no room," she said, "for hate. We have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

I will continue to pray today, and every day, that we can overcome our fears; so that we might join with the congregation of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, who certainly live out the words of our Baptismal Covenant, to "strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being."

Blessed be the name of God.