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The Open Door Community – Hospitality & Resistance in the Catholic Worker Movement

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October-November 2017

God, Guns and America

By Nibs Stroupe

The events in Las Vegas compel me to write on the sacred power of guns in America. Ever since the Ronald Reagan revolution in the 1980s, the worship of guns in American life has deepened and increased. I recently read a 1978 article on guns in American life in *American Heritage* magazine, and its subject was the continuing power of guns. The article's author, John G. Mitchell, indicated that we as a culture were in a fight for our souls over the availability of guns. That fight is just about over — we have put guns at the center of our lives, as evidenced yet again by the mass shooting in Las Vegas, apparently the largest one in American history by a single individual.

The Las Vegas shooting is not considered an act of terrorism, and that is chiefly because the shooter was white.

The shooting joins a long list: Pulse in Florida last year; Charleston, South Carolina and Redlands, California in 2015; Aurora, Colorado in 2012; Virginia Tech in 2007 and many others. And the kicker for me in pronouncing that guns are sacred in American life came in 2012 when 20 of our children were gunned down in Sandy Hook and there was no outcry in Congress. It was as if I were back in Leviticus 20, where sacrificing children to the Ammonite god Molech was strongly prohibited. Such a prohibition means that there was such Molech worship, and the gravity of such a rivalry between God and Molech meant that the death penalty was given to the offenders.

Today, we are not getting any mention of such a rivalry. What we are getting are mentions about mental health, about terrorism, about "loners." Only a few commentators on the left dare to mention that the Las Vegas shooting and the ones that preceded it are a result of our worship of Molech: our belief in the divine power of guns and the violence that they bring. The Nazis and white supremacists in Charlottesville, the re-militarization of our police by the Trump administra-

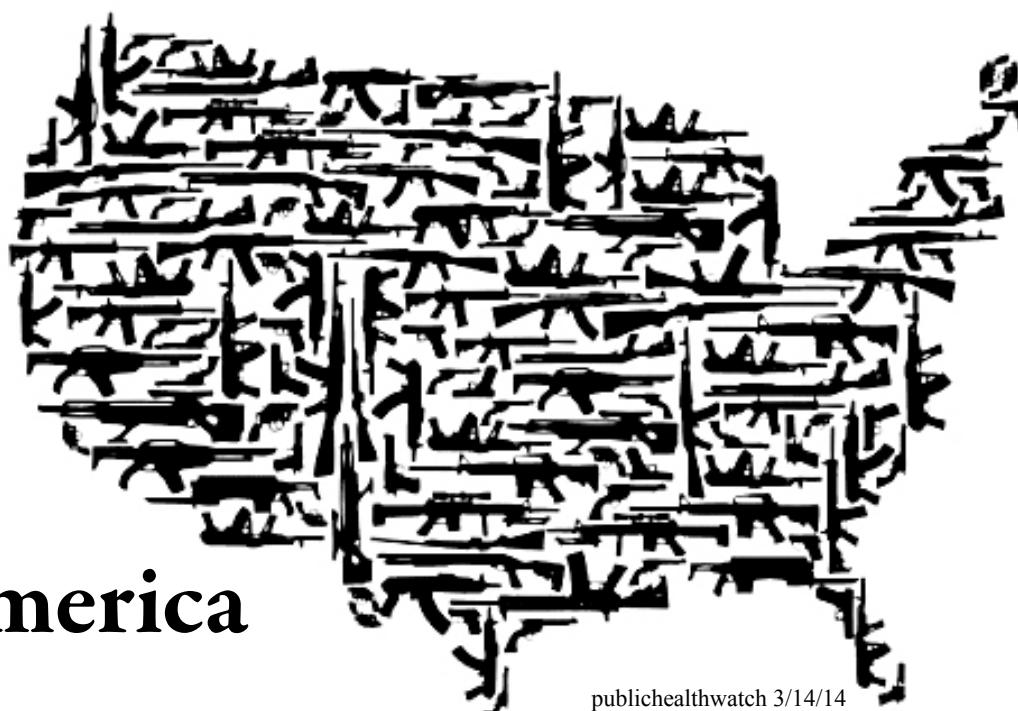
tion, the rise in the price of gun stocks today, all point to this belief held deeply in American culture — we believe in the divine power of guns. There is no other way to put it.

The Las Vegas shooting is not considered an act of terrorism, and that is chiefly because the shooter was white. Our culture believes that white people do not do terrorism, that Dylan Roof's mass killing of African Americans in a church in Charleston was not terrorism, but rather a sick individual. This refusal to connect whiteness with terrorism points to why guns have been given Molechian, divine power in American culture. Those of us who are classified as white have a deep fear of those classified as black, and we believe

that we must have our guns to protect us from black people, especially black men. The lies and propaganda of American history have sunk deeply into our collective white souls — those classified as black and as Native Americans are the savages, and those of us classified as white are the victims. The historical record is so clear on this that it beggars the imagination. Those of us classified as white are the perpetrators, not the other way around.

I felt this powerful, Molechian fear when Roy Moore of Alabama pulled out his gun last week at a rally before he won the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. It was a religious rite designed to speak to the deep fears of white people in Alabama and throughout the country. I could trace those fears from the Mississippi Plan of 1890 to the Scottsboro Boys of the 1930s to the assassinations of the four girls in the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham in 1963 to the killings of Jimmie Lee Jackson, Jonathan Daniels and Viola Liuzzo in 1965. In these acts of terrorism, we must sacrifice our

God, Guns and America *continued on page 7*



publichealthwatch 3/14/14

God Don't Play Favorites

By Peter Gathje

Nearly ten years ago, I went to the border between the U.S. and Mexico. I saw Nogales, a town divided by a wall erected by the U.S. government. For years the people in Nogales, Mexico and Nogales, Arizona moved freely back and forth, going to work, to church, to visit with family, for social events. Then the wall went up. It divided the land, the town and the people.

I went to the border with students from Memphis Theological Seminary to learn about immigration. Our class was called "Faith at the Borders." In addition to going to Nogales, we went to other towns near the border. And we went to Tucson, Arizona, where a number of groups sought to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by closed borders and a wall.

We talked with people on both sides of that wall who were active in issues related to immigration. We saw the poverty on the Mexican side of the wall, and the factories run by U.S. companies that profited from cheap Mexican labor with attempts at unionization blocked by law and by violent force. We learned about how the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) destroyed local economies in Mexico and caused people to head north in search of work.

We went further into Mexico, away from the wall. We walked in the desert. We followed the path of those who sought a place beyond the wall to cross the border into the United States. We saw the "coyotes" who take people across the border for a price. We saw their weapons and learned of their connection to the drug trade. We spoke with border guards and immigration officials both in Mexico and in the U.S.

In Tucson, we saw the mass deportation of undocumented people. They had made it into the United States, and lived here for years. But now they were bound in chains, pushed through a perfunctory hearing and then transported to the border. There they were tossed out on the Mexican side with no resources. I spoke with one man wearing a New York Yankees ball cap. He had been brought to the U.S. when he was four years old. Now he was dumped into Mexico with no family, no connections, no place to go and unable to speak Spanish.

On both sides of the wall we saw people of faith offering hospitality. On the Mexican side of the wall, this hospitality welcomed the people thrown out of the United States. On the U.S. side of the wall, this hospitality welcomed people who survived the desert and the "coyotes" and made it across the border.

At the time of this class, I was just a few years into the work of hospitality at Manna House. But, then as now, I saw the connections between my experiences on the border and

God Don't Play Favorites *continued on page 7*

Lost in Translation

By Joyce Hollyday

The woman on the phone, speaking heavily accented Spanish, introduced herself as Consuela to Rebecca, the coordinator and translator for our bilingual group, *Mujeres Unidas en Fe* (Women United in Faith). Consuela said that she wanted to visit the group and offer a Medicaid presentation.

It seemed a little odd to Rebecca — the current administration has drastically cut funding for public outreach around healthcare, North Carolina has refused to expand Medicaid coverage, and it is generally unavailable to persons who are undocumented. “I’ll bring a variety of options, and a gift for each of the women,” Consuela explained. “It will be a Medicaid party.”

From time to time, we’ve hosted presentations about urgent issues such as legal rights, family emergency plans and local law enforcement. Rebecca figured that perhaps there were healthcare options of which she was unaware. So she agreed to Consuela’s offer and arranged for her to come in late September.

Juanita and I were the first to arrive. Rebecca approached us, laughing heartily. Clarity had dawned on her earlier that morning when Consuela had called back to confirm her visit. “You won’t believe what I’ve done,” Rebecca said, rolling her eyes. The others began to gather. And then Consuela breezed in, lugging two carry-on-size suitcases. She pulled out a palette and personal mirror-on-a-stand for each of us and set them up around the table. I was at my first Mary Kay party.

I confess to having little familiarity with the cosmetics company, having long ago decided that my eyelashes are long enough and my lips and cheeks are sufficiently red

without investing a lot of time and money into them. I was pondering my discomfort with the scene when it grew quickly worse. With the deadline for filing extensions for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) exactly a week away, and a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty swirling around because of the administration’s attacks on young DACA “Dreamers” who now fear deportation, Rebecca needed to meet individually with Mercedes, the mother of an undocumented college student. That left me as the best person to serve as translator for the six other English-speaking *gringas* — a rather pathetic state of affairs.

Consuela used a whole lot of words that never showed up in the Spanish dialogues I memorized in the ninth grade. With a lot of gesturing and a little help from my Span-

ish-speaking friends, I managed to come up with “exfoliant,” “moisturizer,” “freckles,” “wrinkles,” and “age spots.” But I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why she kept frowning and talking about a rooster.

Consuela had driven almost two hours from South Carolina to throw this party with products that were largely out of reach for most of us around the table. She got out of it

a wonderful lunch of gorditas, tamales, chili and flan — but few sales. It all felt rather absurd to me. On the drive back to Juanita’s home, I asked her how she felt about it. She touched the softened skin of her face and beamed a smile at me. She hadn’t felt so pampered in a very long time. Maybe it was better than a Medicaid party after all.

She touched the softened skin of her face and beamed a smile at me. She hadn’t felt so pampered in a very long time.

As I pulled up to her mobile home and her seven Chihuahuas encircled the car, barking, I asked Juanita about the rooster. She laughed and pointed at the corners of her eyes. *Patas de gallo* — literally, “rooster feet” — in English is, of course, “crow’s feet.” It refers to those lines that appear on our faces over time as a result of years of smiling. Though Consuela would have liked for us to



spend a small fortune trying to erase them, I like to think of them as permanent and beautiful etchings of joy — with maybe a little wisdom thrown in. ♦

Joyce Hollyday is an author and founding co-pastor of Circle of Mercy in Asheville, NC, where she is active with the immigrant community and the Sanctuary movement. She has been a friend of the Open Door for four decades. Her blog can be found at www.joycehollyday.com.

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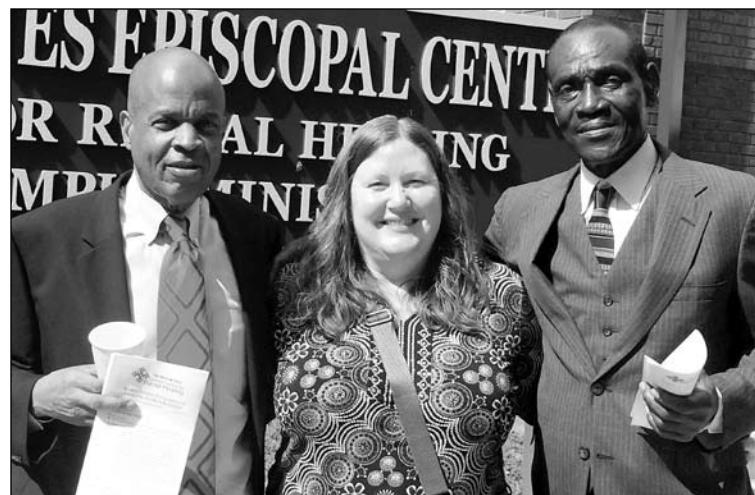
HOSPITALITY

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Left to right: *Former Open Door Community members Cordell Collier, Mary Catherine Johnson and J.P. Norris joined Catherine Meeks for the opening celebration of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing in Atlanta.*

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Please join us on **Facebook**

for the continuing journey of the

Open Door Community in Baltimore.

Thank you, David, Eduard and Murphy.

Update 3 from Eduard Loring

Down but Not Out in Baltimore, October 15, 2017

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Corinthians 4:7-9a, NRSV).

Dearest Companions of The Way,

Last night Murphy and I had Eucharist with Nelia and Calvin Kimbrough, David Payne and our daughter, Hannah. Today I feel fed by the Spirit of Love and the hunger for Justice and Mercy.



Jason Buc

Murphy Davis, David Payne, Ed Loring, Calvin and Nelia Kimbrough, Hannah Murphy Buc

Paul, a blind elitist, upon being given sight, threw himself into building The Way. Although too narrow and Greek in his understanding of The Way (he missed the centrality of the kingdom of God on earth, and was too anxious about life after death and getting to heaven), Paul gave us many a text filled with light and love. His authority in my life lies in his paying the cost of discipleship: whippings, jail, run out of town, executed by the same powers and principalities that rule the American Empire today.

The world around us is burning. Can you feel the heat of the California fires? Are they the promised flames? Or should we look for another? Members of Congress are beginning to get tired of bombing hospitals in Yemen. The plight of the people of Yemen, like the homeless, give all of us — children of light/children of darkness — a clear reflection of who we are. America will continue into violence, nuclear weapons and autocracy until we house the homeless, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner and pray. Herein lies the possibility (probability?) of radical transformation.

Today we hear the cry of the poor from American citizens in our colony of Puerto Rico, ruled by neo-liberal privatizing hedge fund freaks. We are thankful to Amy Goodman ("Democracy Now!") and the progressives for forcing Trump to waive the Jones Act for Puerto Rico. Under the law, only U.S.-flagged ships are allowed to move goods between U.S. ports.

The accountability and consequences of Harvey Weinstein's lust for power and sexual pleasures through the humiliation of our sisters makes me thankful that Ta-Nehisi Coates sees some advances in American life. Although I have not heard of Mr.

Weinstein victimizing women of color, my mind could not but move to the backbone of white history. Many a white Christian male slaver would purchase a "right comely wench" after viewing and feeling her on the platform at the slave market. He took her to his plantation or house. He did with her as he pleased. He faced no accountability. He had bragging rights at the next cock fight. He lives in the misogyny of Mr. Weinstein. He lives in the whitest whitehouse. His Christianity is inside Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr. And the "right comely wench?" She is all about us, from Hollywood to the young street women around the corner

from the Open Door Community Baltimore. Why are the fires burning in Baltimore?

Thank you for your prayer and action for Bo Tharpe. He lives! Brother Bo received a stay of execution from the U.S. Supreme Court a few hours after the state of Georgia had scheduled him to die on September 26. Let us continue to pray and act for his Black life.

Thus, at the request of the Holy Spirit, I have not shared their baptismal names. Murphy and I were thrilled and honored to be invited to officiate their wedding.

I mounted my bike and headed off to Dorothy's house. Two blocks behind and 22 blocks ahead, the hot asphalt jumped up and yanked me down like Hades' rape of Persephone. My head bounced twice, and without my helmet I would not be telling this accidental tale. I knew I was injured as I lay half on my bike and half on the street. I lay dazed for a few minutes until the first car stopped. I could not tell whether she was from Samaria or Baltimore, but I felt the love circulating through her body. She retrieved my cell phone from my pocket and I horrified Murphy with the news of my crash. She agreed to go ahead to the wedding and David Payne would take me to the hospital.

From September 9 until today has been a painful and disappointing time. My wrist doctor found four broken bones, and I had surgery on September 21. Now I have a pink cast and am in the midst of many follow-up appointments and physical therapy. Murphy has been doing 95% of the house chores, cooking, keeping up with my medications and helping me get dressed.

Forty-eight hours after my surgery, David Payne had to drive Murphy and me to the emergency room at Johns Hopkins Hospital, this time because Murphy

was having terrible pain in her abdomen. After being in the ER for many hours, we learned that Murphy has a perforated bile duct, which they initially hoped they could manage with antibiotics. But Murphy's pain persisted, and surgery became necessary. We hoped for an immediate surgery date to bring Murphy relief from her significant pain, but the date with the knife is delayed until October 23, followed by a lengthy recovery. By prayer and the practices of hospitality and justice let us yearn for Murphy's healing. Thank you for caring.



David Payne

Our health issues are a major setback. Murphy and I are on strong pain medications. Work sits on the table. I can only type with one finger. (Guess which one?) We would not be making it without David Payne, Hannah, Michaela and your prayers and kindnesses. Jason, our son by marriage, will be dispatched to Puerto Rico for disaster relief (disaster capitalism). However, he departs the same week that Murphy hits the knife and for the fourth time has her belly splayed.

Murphy and I are thankful. We are never alone. Trust our thanks. Feel our love. Hear our need.

Ed-One-Finger

P.S. You can follow the Open Door on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/ODCBalt/>) to receive current updates as well as social justice news and actions.



Photographs by Mary Catherine Johnson

A Journey of Vision, Hard Work and Grace

By Catherine Meeks

Five years ago I became Chair of the Anti-Racism Commission in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. At that time, the commission's work was not well received and most folks worked hard to avoid attending the training for as long as possible. This commission, which had been formed about six years prior, was charged with making sure that workshops on racism were provided for clergy, deacons and all who were serving in leadership positions in the Diocese.

In the early years, the trainers used a corporate diversity training model, and one of the most consistent criticisms of the training was about that model. People of faith were longing for a model that was clearly connected to their faith journeys. The concerns about the training model were accompanied by a larger concern that the commission was not actually doing anything to address the issues of racism beyond the training sessions.

When I became chairperson, we began to re-imagine our work. First, we changed the name of the commission to Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism in order to embody a more positive projection of our intention. The basic intention of such work is to create the Beloved Community, but in order to achieve that goal, racism has to be dismantled. We expanded our mission statement to reflect our new intention and we restructured the one-day training to include a celebration of Holy Communion.

It appears now that adding Communion at the beginning of the training and placing the day under that umbrella, along with the understanding that the one-day training is part of the long and continuous journey of spiritual formation was revolutionary. At the very beginning, we saw major changes in the atmosphere in the room during trainings. It is so important to begin the hard work of exploring racism with the establishment of some type of common context that binds the folks in the room in some way. For people of faith, it is the commitment that has been made to be on the faith journey and to follow God and not our human instincts alone.

In addition to these changes, the commission began to host pilgrimages, book studies, film screenings, workshops on other related topics and day-long conversations on race. The response was very encouraging, and as we continued to be vigilant, word began to spread across the wider church and community about what we were doing in Atlanta. We were not seeking that in any way, but it seems that when there is a

clear focus and continued commitment to it, there is a possibility for Grace to abound.

Grace has been the primary companion to our vision and hard work, leading to the establishment of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing and the dissolution of the Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism. The members of the former commission will be enfolded into the work of the Center for Racial Healing and the work in the Diocese will continue as it has been for the past five years. But that work is going to expand to the wider church. Our Presiding Bishop has entered into a formal partnership with the Diocese of Atlanta in order to support the work across the Episcopal Communion as a national initiative.

The Center for Racial Healing will host local, regional and national conversations on race; engage our sisters and brothers whose first language is Spanish, both in the U.S. and in our Latin American Dioceses; offer classes and workshops on Native American spirituality and healing practices; develop a youth curriculum for kindergarten through high school on dismantling racism and host film screenings, book studies, pilgrimages and lecture series. The Center staff will be available for consultations with others who are seeking to enlarge their vision, imagine new models for their dismantling racism work and continue to do all that is possible to demonstrate that the Beloved Community will occur when we create brave spaces where the truth can be spoken and heard.

I am very thankful to serve as the executive director for the center and to continue as the primary shepherdess of this vision. Though the Episcopal Church is the center's primary constituency, we are always willing to share with anyone who is interested in our Eucharistic-centered dismantling racism training and any of our other work, which is firmly rooted in the understanding that dismantling racism work is basically about spiritual formation, continuing throughout one's entire life.

This understanding frees us from any notion that the work of dismantling racism is formulaic and can be done quickly if one can only find the correct formula. In fact, it is about the lifetime commitment of dismantling both inner and outer oppressors and seeking to allow the Grace of God to help all of us engage in a daily journey of affirming truth so that we can be the people that God calls us to be. ♦

Catherine Meeks is the Founding Executive Director of the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing, and the retired Clara Carter Acree Distinguished Professor of Socio-cultural Studies and Sociology from Wesleyan College. She has published six books and is editor of Living Into God's Dream: Dismantling Racism in America (2016), which focuses on racial healing and reconciliation. She writes for the Huffington Post and is a regular contributor to Hospitality, published by the Open Door Community. She is involved with prison work, visits regularly on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (kayma53@att.net)

Above: Bishop Robert Wright, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, leads the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing. On his right is Bishop Victor Atta-Baffoe, Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast, Ghana. On Bishop Wright's left are Catherine Meeks and Bishop Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church.

Right:
Founding
Executive
Director
Catherine
Meeks.



Voices and Views from Hebron

By Weldon Nisly

Greetings from Hebron, dear family and friends, I have been with the Christian Peacemaker Teams Palestine team in Hebron for over four weeks, and have only three weeks left with the team. We continue to be very busy with long days of scheduled and spontaneous responsibilities. Being present in and confronting the overt and omnipresent oppression here is one of the most intense and draining experiences of my life. Yet I know that what I face as a privileged, white, older, educated, American, Christian male is minuscule compared to what every Palestinian faces every day. And soon I will leave and go home again to a world that ignores, denies and contributes to this oppression in conscious, subconscious and unconscious ways.

So it is difficult to find time and energy and words to share another “Voices and Views from Hebron” with you. Nevertheless, I am committed to doing so whenever and however possible — to name what Jesus has given me eyes to see and the responsibility to invite you to see through the eyes of Jesus.

The team decided that we need a short break. So all five of us left Hebron to spend a couple of days in Bethlehem or Jerusalem or Hebron. I arrived in Jerusalem at noon today to spend two nights at the Rivoli Hotel, which is in East Jerusalem, just outside the Old City and across the street from Herod’s Gate and near the Damascus Gate. After checking in at the hotel, I walked a few blocks up the street to a great little Palestinian bookstore and coffeehouse to enjoy great coffee. I could spend the next year just reading the great Palestinian



Left: As Israeli Forces progress further into H1, an area under Palestinian Authority control, they are met by the Palestinian police who ask them to leave.



Below: Children wait at Qitoun checkpoint while one child at a time is let through the turnstile by the Israeli Border Police who check their school bags.

Hebron has been getting more tense, with more settlers and soldiers everywhere. Checkpoints are navigated subject to frequent delays and questions.

books they have on their shelves. This afternoon I explored Old City Jerusalem, walking through the Muslim, Jewish, Armenian and Christian Quarters as well as going to the Western Wall.

The next several weeks will be even busier, with some holidays bringing more people to Hebron, resulting in more military presence at checkpoints and on the streets. We also have a CPT delegation coming to Palestine from October 10-23.

Last Thursday afternoon, Chris and I went to South Hebron Hills to spend the night with our friends and partners of the Umm al-Khair Bedouin community. A 23-year-old member of Umm al-Khair, Tariq is their organizer for international teams to partner with them. They have faced military demolitions of their simple homes, built of metal or stone or tents. A large settler community has built up next to them that tries to drive them away so the settlers can take over the land. It is a long, sordid and tragically common story.

Carole and I visited Umm al-Khair three weeks ago. Soldiers were building a razor wire fence across Umm al-Khair land at night. It cuts across the hillside and pathways where the Bedouin community’s sheep and goats walk every day to find a little grass here and there across the top of the hillside. The sheep and goats are accustomed to walking the paths, and now walk into the razor wire, getting entangled and bleeding to death. The shepherd tries to keep the sheep and goats lower down the hillside. But years of habit are hard to break for sheep as well as people.

This time, Chris and I went to spend the night with Tariq and the Bedouin community. For over 30 nights in a row, some settlers have been throwing rocks at the tents and tin homes of Umm al-Khair families between 11:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. The stones awaken the people and frighten the chil-

dren. So four international groups, including CPT, are trying to provide a presence with Umm al-Khair each night.

That night Tariq, Chris and I were sleeping in the closest tent to the settler community. We were awakened at 2:40 a.m. by a rock hitting a metal tent pole. I sat up in a half-asleep daze, wondering if I was dreaming or if this was real. It was real. A few moments later a second rock hit the tent over our heads, followed by another rock. We were sleeping fully clothed on pads on the cement floor. We jumped up with flashlights and cameras to see if we could find anyone throwing rocks. You can see a

video (see note below for “week in photos”) of this night madness. For over two hours we roamed along the fence between the settler community and the Bedouin community, but never found anyone. Tariq called the Israeli police, who promised to come investigate but never showed up, even though they claimed they had come and found no one. Chris and I will go spend this Thursday night with the Umm al-Khair community again.

One of the gifts of being with the Umm al-Khair community was the feast they shared with us. We sat on the cement in a circle around dishes of delicious lentils, hummus, tomato-potato stew, beans, fresh tomatoes and cucumbers and lots of hardy flat bread they bake in their outdoor oven. And, of course we drank endless cups of tea.

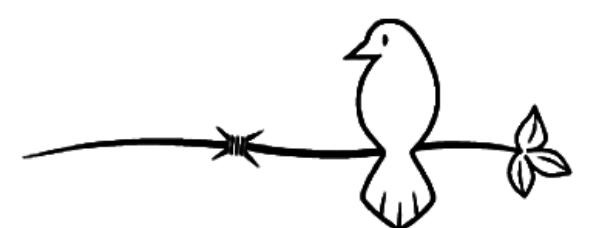
Hebron has been getting more tense, with more settlers and soldiers everywhere. Checkpoints are navigated subject to frequent delays and questions. One morning, Alicia and I were on the way to the Salaymeh checkpoint for our morning monitoring of children going to school. It is a long walk through the Souq and the Mosque checkpoint. We were stopped and questioned, then turned back and not allowed to go on. So we had to walk a much longer route across a very steep hill to get to the checkpoint where we could be with the children going to school. There are stories about these checkpoints in the “week in photos” below, including a video link.

It is late, dear family and friends, and I am trying to get extra sleep tonight and tomorrow night before returning to Hebron. Tomorrow morning I am meeting with the staff at the Mennonite Central Committee Jerusalem office and then with the staff of the Lutheran World Federation Jerusalem Program office.

Good night and Peace be with you all,
Weldon

The link to our CPT Week in Photos for September 20-26: <http://mailchi.mp/cpt/a-week-in-photos-sep-20-26?e=1879c62f40> and our CPT Week in Photos for September 27-Oct 2: <http://mailchi.mp/cpt/a-week-in-photos-sep-26-oct-2?e=1879c62f40>. There is video link in the “Searched before School” and in the “Morning in Umm al-Khair” stories. Chris and I were present for and filmed those stories. For those of you on Facebook, you can search for Christian Peacemaker Teams Palestine or CPT Palestine for regular stories from the Hebron team. ♦

After 40 years of Mennonite Church ministry that included community, pastoral and peace ministries, Weldon Nisly currently devotes himself in “retirement” to Contemplative Just-Peace and work with Christian Peacemaker Teams. He is a Benedictine Oblate. His life is devoted to the abolition of war.



christian peacemaker teams

From Here to Timbuktu

The Eighth Commandment: Do Not Steal

By Katie Aikins

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10, Deut. 5:19

The Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel on their journey out of bondage. God heard their cries, God heard their suffering and brought them out of bondage. So already we have in the biblical witness a God who opposes systems of domination and systems of supremacy of any kind. The God of our ancestors is a liberating God, concerned with bringing people out of bondage. The commandments serve to instruct the people on how to stay on the path of liberation. Each commandment in one way or another is about loving God and loving your neighbor. We are learning that these commandments — especially the latter six — are about protecting community members from oppressive and exploitative practices. Stealing was in the category of oppressive practice. Stealing was to break down community. Stealing (taking something from someone else that does not belong to you) was dangerous because it ripped into the social fabric; it destroyed trust between people. Stealing is connected to greed. Stealing sees only the object that is desired, detached from the person or context to which that object belongs. Stealing sees no history connected to the object.

We must be careful to not interpret the commandment too narrowly. We must not reduce the command to individual acts alone. So, for example, maybe you think of that time when you were nine years old and you took that bag of M&Ms from the corner store without paying for it. Was that stealing? Yes, it was. Was it a bad thing to do? Yes, it was. Or think about someone who is food insecure, a mother, perhaps, who is trying to provide enough food for her kids but doesn't have enough money because her job doesn't pay a living wage. So one day she picks up an extra bag of rice from the store without paying for it. Is she stealing? Yes, she is. Is this kind of theft the kind God is most concerned about? I'm not so sure.

Does the commandment have anything to say about the market-driven system we live in that thrives on theft? In such a system, it can be totally legal for investment bankers, regulatory agencies and heads of corporations to amass huge fortunes for themselves while robbing the poor. We know the many stories of corporations that commit massive fraud and are rarely punished. When you have a system of theft that creates the situation for that mother to steal a bag of rice because she doesn't have a living wage while working for a company whose top executive is raking in billions, it begs the question: "Who is stealing from whom?" And who is being held accountable? The eighth commandment must not be so reduced and thinly interpreted that we end up pointing the finger at individual acts of stealing while ignoring the major thefts taking place in the very systems we've created. Because the truth is, behind great wealth there is usually a history of theft.

Where this commandment challenges me is that instead of asking, "Have you stolen something today?" the commandment asks, "How will you live now that you've realized that you are already a thief, and that you've benefited from a system of thievery?" I'm living in a context where much of my wealth is connected to that which has been stolen. As a person classified as white, I have privileges and access to wealth in part because I am benefiting *still* from what my ancestors stole: land stolen from Native Americans, people stolen from Africa. Unpaid and forced labor of Africans and immigrants create the foundations of our market-driven economy, an economy of legalized theft. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. And it's completely legal. To make matters worse, many churches would say this system is completely

righteous and moral.

If we are honest and humble, if we allow the God of Liberation and the gospel we know in Jesus Christ to speak to us, we will find ourselves convicted by the eighth commandment. Just like the apostle Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." All (especially white folks) have benefited from what ancestors stole, and we fall short of the glory of God. The only path forward is a journey of repentance.

But what does repentance look like? What could it look like? We are *not* without witnesses. We have witnesses.

I learned about one of these witnesses while Heather and I were away on vacation. We spent one day visiting the John Brown Historic Farm in North Elba, New York. John Brown,



Ade Bethune

a white abolitionist, is best known for his role in organizing and leading a raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. Seven of Brown's men were killed, some fled, and some were captured by pro-slavery farmers, militiamen and the U.S. Marines, led by none other than Robert E. Lee. John Brown was found guilty by the commonwealth of Virginia for his actions and was hanged. His body was brought back to the North Elba farm, where he is buried. Heather and

several people who financially supported Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. Gerrit Smith also sold the North Elba farm to John Brown. You see, Gerrit Smith was a very wealthy landowner in New York; in fact, he was the wealthiest landowner in the state of New York at this time. He inherited large swaths of land from his father.

In New York between 1821 and 1873, if you were a free Black man, you were only permitted to vote if you had a property requirement of \$250. This was a discriminatory law of course; very few free Black men had this kind of wealth in property.

Gerrit Smith was convicted by the sinfulness of his wealth. I don't know if he made the connection between his wealth and it being stolen. But we do know that he became convinced through his faith that it was a sin to be rich and that racism and inequality were sins. And so, with this conviction, in the seven years from 1846 to 1853, Gerrit Smith gave away 120,000 acres of land that he owned in the Adirondacks to 3,000 Black New Yorkers in 40-acre lots. The hope was to give opportunity for property ownership of \$250 so that Black free men could vote. This experiment at some point became referred to as "Timbuktu." It was a dream that many Black folks had at the time — the dream of being able to own and farm your own land, to be self-sufficient, to survive by living an agrarian life style away from the city. To be able to vote and gain political power, to be treated like a human being and hopefully experience less racism and hatred and violence in a rural setting than you would find in a city. Gerrit Smith worked with other Black social reformers including Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnett. Garnett spent countless hours recruiting free Black men to become grantees of the land that Gerrit Smith was giving away in the Adirondacks.

This settlement was not successful in the way Smith and others had hoped. Black ownership of the land did not endure for a whole host of reasons (the enduring power of racism being the most fundamental one). However, Gerrit Smith is a powerful witness of someone whose actions exemplified a life lived in repentance. Repentance isn't about gloom and doom. Repentance is about life and giving of your life. It can be joyful and freeing. It can mean giving back, giving away what is not yours in the first place in order to be a part of the larger dream of God's reign. The dream was called Timbuktu. Timbuktu is an actual place in Africa, in the country of Mali. Today we use the phrase "from here to Timbuktu" to refer to some faraway place that you'll probably never really reach. Well, that's not so unlike how the reign of God may seem. An outlandish place, a place where God's justice reigns and racism and violence against Black folks will cease to be an everyday reality.

But Jesus said that the reign of God is not as far away as you think. Jesus said that the reign of God is near to us.

What if we decided we wanted to give money away because it wasn't ours to begin with and we discerned that God would like it to go to someone else who's been defrauded by our system's history of theft?

I ate lunch and took a nap on a field overlooking the historic farmhouse and gravesite where John Brown and several of his followers are buried. It was a beautiful piece of land.

While we were there, we learned about another white abolitionist. I knew a little about John Brown, but I had not heard about Gerrit Smith. And he really captured my attention. Gerrit Smith was a supporter of John Brown, and one of

Jesus said it is "within you" and "among you." Jesus said this just a bit before he met that little person Zaccheus up in a tree. Zaccheus was not so unlike Gerrit Smith. Both of them were rich. Smith may have been more well-respected than Zaccheus, but both of them were rich and convinced

From Here to Timbuktu *continued on page 8*

God, Guns and America *continued from page 1*

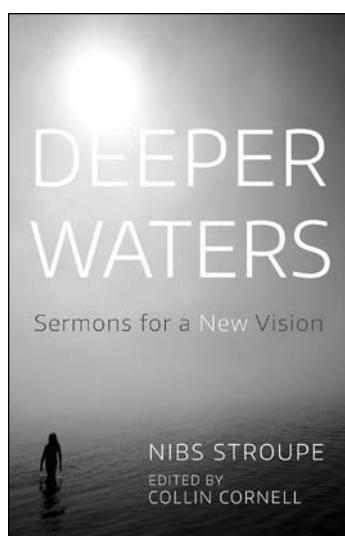
children and our people to the god of guns that made white America great — Molech is ever with us. I should not have been surprised, but I was, that a little over a week after this religious rite was performed in Alabama, Molech called forth one of his followers to kill and slaughter.

I'm not hopeful on this, but I wish that I were. The belief in guns is just too deeply rooted in America's cultural life at this point. Even here, however, I must remember that a Palestinian Jew named Jesus moved the world with just a few women and men following him. So, let us pray that the God we know in Jesus will make that kind of move in us, and I am grateful for those who are working heart and soul on this. That movement is our only hope. Let us practice what we pray! Otherwise it is the grim words from Leviticus 20 about Molech worship: God will give us the death penalty. ♦

Nibs Stroupe is retired pastor of Oakhurst Presbyterian Church and is author of "Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision," published by Wipf and Stock. He has a weekly blog www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com, and you can contact him at nibs.stroupe@gmail.com.

Deeper Waters Sermons for a New Vision

By Rev. Nibs Stroupe
Edited By Collin Cornell



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Deeper Waters is a sermon collection — but also a manifesto. Its sermons sound forth a call for Christian preaching that is evangelical and emancipatory: unashamed of the good news about Christ's death and resurrection and resolute in resistance to white supremacy, male domination, and redemptive violence.

The author, pastor Nibs Stroupe, is a white son of the segregated South, nurtured in its twin traditions of anti-black white racism and Christian faith. But through the courageous witness of black Americans engaged in the Civil Rights movement, Stroupe experienced conversion to a new theological vision. God's loving claim on humanity in Jesus Christ abolishes oppressive idols and breaks down dividing barriers. This conviction propelled Nibs into a lifelong ministry of gospel proclamation and antiracist struggle.

For thirty-four years, Stroupe pastored at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, a multiracial congregation in metropolitan Atlanta. The sermons of this collection present the mature fruit of that ministry, and they offer a gift and example to the next generation of preachers and workers summoned as witnesses of Jesus Christ to the American context.

God Don't Play Favorites *continued from page 1*

my experiences with our guests from the streets. Both our guests and the undocumented who come to this country from other lands, are refugees. Both are pushed from their homes by economic and political powers beyond their control. Both are on the move in search of jobs and safe places to stay. Both are vulnerable to powerful people who will exploit them in their poverty and desperation. Both are hounded by policies enforced by the police or other government agents that focus on the "crime" of being poor. Both thus suffer from a presumed criminality that makes their lives legally tenuous and culturally suspect.

I thought about these connections as I shared the Word of the Day with our guests at Manna House over the past few days. "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism." (James 4:1) The refugees from the streets drew direct conclusions from this passage.

"God don't play favorites."

"If you believe in Jesus, you can't favor some people over other people."

"Ain't nobody better than anyone else."

"There's something of God in everyone; you gotta respect that."

But they also drew contrasts between this Word of the Day and their experienced realities.

"Trump, our commander in grief, doesn't believe that."

"That ain't the way the world works."

"People see me as homeless and say, 'You're not legit.'"

"Must not be very many believers in that glorious Lord Jesus Christ."

I see our guests at Manna House as faith-filled realists.

As people of faith, they know the meaning of this biblical passage is clear. If we are followers of Christ, then we must not play favorites. We must treat everyone with dignity. We must welcome the stranger. But as realists they see this nation for what it is. The rich are favored over the poor. The white are favored over the black and the brown. People without homes or shelter are "not legit," they are condemned as "illegals."

The contrast between faith and reality is where the work of discipleship takes place. Like Jesus, disciples must be agitators, unsatisfied with the way things are, inspired by a vision of the way things ought to be. At Manna House, we first try to live the vision by practicing hospitality. We welcome and affirm the dignity of those pushed around and judged as "not legit."

But we are also called to live this vision in a second way. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has eliminated the dividing wall between us. (Ephesians 2:14) If we are in Christ, then we cannot practice favoritism. We have to fearlessly advocate for those persons displaced by greed and fear and walls. So we agitate for public policy that tears down the walls that separate us in the name of playing favorites. We agitate for a society that builds up every one as persons made in the image of God. God don't play favorites. ♦

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poetry corner



Julie Lonneman

Good Bones

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

—Maggie Smith

Maggie Smith is a freelance writer, editor and award-winning poet. In June of 2016, three days after a gunman killed 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, "Good Bones" was published in the literary journal, Waxwing, and it immediately went viral, having touched a nerve with people struggling to come to terms with the violence in Orlando. It is the title poem of Smith's latest book, Good Bones (Tupelo Press, 2017).

America, Be Beautiful

By Rosalie Riegle

America the beautiful be beautiful.
—Cecilia González-Andrie

“You’re your own worst enemy,” my mother would sigh as I refused to let her detangle my hair (age 3), pushed aside the warm oatmeal on a frigid Michigan day (age 6) and flaunted her authority as I drove off on Charlie’s motorcycle (age 16).

And she was right, of course, as mothers often are. Today, her words resound in my ears as I look at our country’s cruel immigration policies, its deteriorating relations with allies, its inability to proceed with health care and other legislative decisions, its proliferation of assault rifles, the crumbling infrastructure and increasingly emasculated environmental laws.

Truly, we are our own worst enemy. Let’s face it, our braids are tangled. We haven’t fortified ourselves in the right way by disciplining our spending and living on the golden rule — either individually or as a nation. Assuredly, we are driving headlong into irreparable damage to our planet by ignoring threats to the environment.

No matter whom we voted for this time around, “America First” has been our lived motto since our country’s founding. This concept of national sovereignty has expanded outward until it has come to mean that our will must be done throughout the entire world. Case in point: We currently have military personnel stationed in 150 countries, and that doesn’t count covert activities. Think what we would say if Germany, for instance, wanted a military base in South Carolina! Or Uganda posted its soldiers in Michigan, near the Canadian border. Our drone strikes make us even more enemies as they kill families with children in a vain search for “the bad guys” in the Middle East. Instead of killing our enemies by remote control, drone strikes actually recruit disaffected and poverty-stricken young men to a life of terrorism.

All of us must take responsibility for this militaristic empire, even if we disagree with it, as we pay the taxes for



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this empire. We have lost sight of Christ’s community and embraced instead the false community of nationalism. We blithely sing “America, the Beautiful” and don’t see that it masks the beauty of the planet and indeed, threatens to destroy it.

Now, I love a part of this planet — a small lake in northeast Michigan. I love the early morning light on the tall pines and the slant of late afternoon sun. I love the old cabin and the family and friends that find rest here. I also love the thousands of people of good will and joy that I have found in the Catholic Worker and other peace groups throughout the land we call the United States.

But I do not love the United States of America. I have come to understand, finally, that our country — yes, our empire — is the root of the violence in the world, both the violence in our own cities and the violence and upheaval gripping the world today. Our concept of exceptionalism has wrought havoc, especially in the messages of hate toward those whom we see as other.

We shouldn’t even be appropriating the name *America*, for America is really two continents — North and South — with many countries within their long coastlines, all subservient in some way to U.S. power. We are no longer united within our 50 states, either. But we can be, and we must, not in some false sense of being first, as our concept of nationalism

mandates, not by all looking alike or thinking alike or following the same religion, but as we were meant to be — as people created in God’s image who seek good will for all peoples throughout the world. Yes, we must, if our planet is to survive.

So the next time you sing “America, the Beautiful,” call it to be beautiful, as Cecilia González-Andrie writes. Perhaps your community could substitute these alternate lyrics, written over 20 years ago by Miriam Therese Winters and even more necessary today.

How beautiful, our spacious skies,
our amber waves of grain,
our purple mountains as they rise above
the fruitful plain.

America! America! God’s gracious gifts abound,
and more and more we’re grateful
for life’s bounty all around.
Indigenous and immigrant,
our daughters and our sons:
O may we never rest content till all are truly one.

America! America! God grant that we may be
a sisterhood and brotherhood from sea to shining sea.
How beautiful, sincere lament,
the wisdom born of tears,
the courage called for to repent
the bloodshed through the years.

America! America! God grant that we may be
a nation blessed, with none oppressed,
true land of liberty.
How beautiful, two continents, and islands in the sea
that dream of peace, non-violence,
all people living free.

Americas! Americas! God grant that we may be
a hemisphere where people here all live in harmony. ♦

Rosalie Riegle is a grandmother, an oral historian and emerita in English from Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan. Now living in Evanston, Illinois and active with Su Casa Catholic Worker on the South Side of Chicago, Rosalie’s latest books are Doing Time for Peace: Resistance, Family, and Community, and Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace.

From Here to Timbuktu *continued from page 6*

that the wealth they owned was connected to sin. They both knew that, somewhere along the line, some people had been defrauded, killed, lost their livelihood, forced to steal from the local store. Zaccheus and Gerrit Smith had benefited from this economy of stealing, which was completely legal and worked in their favor. But to meet Jesus that day changed everything for Zaccheus. And we are told that the day that Zaccheus decided to divest himself of his wealth, *salvation* came to him and his household.

The very salvation of Zaccheus was linked to his divestment of wealth. His journey toward becoming a new person began with divesting from the wealth that he had stolen and benefited from. This is a picture of living in repentance. Zaccheus and Gerrit Smith can be our witnesses today.

We cannot repair all of history. You and I can never give back all that our white ancestors took. We can’t fix it. And in humility, as white folks we must face this impossibility. But it is also our responsibility to look at our lives and look honestly at what we have, what we *can* do, what we *can* give, what we can decide to *not take*. We can create limits to what we are

willing to own. We can divest. We can ask ourselves, “Where did it come from? Who lost their life so that I have this privilege? Who is not getting something right now because I am getting something?”

These are hard things to face. But Jesus has asked us to follow him. And if we are serious about being Jesus followers, then we don’t have to be afraid of these questions. Because salvation is offered to us when we look at the truth about our lives. Liberation is offered to each of us in the murkiness and muck of our world. Liberation doesn’t always feel fluffy and fun. Sometimes salvation work really does look like divestment, giving money away and making reparations, even if they are small and partial and imperfect. Bad religion and mainstream white-washed Christianity has made salvation into a spiritual, heady, otherworldly thing. But it is both earthly and spiritual. For Gerrit Smith, it looked like 120,000 acres to give away. For Zaccheus, it looked like giving resources to the poor and making financial reparations to those he defrauded.

What does it look like for us? What if we as a church — a small church (small like Zaccheus!) here in West Philly,

Tabernacle United Church — decided we were going to take some time to do some joyful repentance work around our money and wealth, with the goal of making an act of financial reparation? What if we decided we wanted to give money away because it wasn’t ours to begin with and we discerned that God would like it to go to someone else who’s been defrauded by our system’s history of theft? What if we did that? I’d like us to do this together. It may feel like traveling from here to Timbuktu. But it’s not unlike the reign of God. Jesus often asks us to do impossible things in company with a God of Liberation, for whom all things are possible.

Amen! ♦

Katie Aikins is Pastor at Tabernacle United Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and preached this sermon there on August 27, 2017 as part of a series on the Ten Commandments. She and her wife, Heather Bargeron, are members of the Vine and Fig Tree Community. Katie was a volunteer at the Open Door during her years as a student at Candler School of Theology. (tabunitedpastor@gmail.com)