

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
John Eaton

Lectionary 139:

Isa 5: 1 – 7
Ps 80: 9,12,13-14, 15-16, 19-20
Phil 4:6 – 9
Matt 21: 33 – 43

Possible preaching theme 1:

Daily life is fraught with problems that require some resolution. There are various strategies available for problem solving. Even young children sense early in life that violence is sometimes the fastest and easiest method to get what they want. Using violence to solve problems can have disastrous consequences.

Possible resources:

- A somewhat technical but accessible textbook chapter on [“The Biological and Emotional Causes of Aggression,”](#)
- A short article with useful links on [“The Importance of Psychology of Violence and Aggression”](#)
- A technical overview article on the [“Biological explanations of criminal behavior”](#)
- 4-minute easy read on how [“Violence Is Learned... But It Can Also Be Unlearned”](#)
- Accessible report from a neuroscience lab addressing the question [“What is the psychology behind violence and aggression?”](#)

Possible preaching theme 2:

Good information does not always result in good decision-making. Decisions can be skewed by internal forces (e.g., emotions such as greed or anger) or by external forces (e.g., peer pressure, alcohol, etc.).

Possible resources:

- A brief definition of [“What is Decision Science?”](#)
- Easy read explaining [“The Neuroscience of Making a Decision”](#)
- Another quite accessible introduction to [“The Science of Decision-Making”](#)
- 10-minute read on [“The Science of Decision Making: Why Smart People Do Dumb Things”](#)
- Neuroscientists have developed a mathematical model of the optimal choice strategy in [“Brain: How to optimize decision making?”](#)

Homily Outline on Theme 1

There are a variety of strategies for peaceful conflict resolution between individuals or groups. These include:

- Avoidance: just walk away
- Capitulation: give in to the demands of the other
 - “Turn the other cheek”
- Collaboration: find a way to work together
- Compromise: find a mutually agreeable solution even if neither party is fully satisfied.

For many individuals, groups, and nations, the problem-solving strategy of choice continues to be violence.

- By mid-April there were already 163 mass shootings in the US in 2023
- The War in Ukraine has raged for over a year.
- A glance at your local newspaper, nightly news or internet news source will update this sad reality.

Scientists are devoting more and more energy trying to understand the root causes of violence.

- In doing so they distinguish between aggression (innate) and violence (learned).
- Violent people often justify their actions with faulty rationale, e.g.,
 - Personal defense: personal equivalent of the military’s “preemptive strike”
 - “Do unto others before they do unto you,”
 - Teach the other person a lesson,
 - Achieve a higher good,
 - Advance/defend one’s religious beliefs (see Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*) for religious underpinnings of violence,
 - Gain access to resources (food, desirable mates).
- Biological factors
 - An overactive amygdala can increase tendency to violence
 - Suppressed prefrontal cortex can reduce internal curbs on violence
- Excessive alcohol consumption is a contributing factor in the majority of violent crimes
- Among emotions that might trigger violence, frustration is often cited.
- Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University indicate that violence can be addictive
 - Elicits positive feelings of power and dominance

The cultural world of the Bible frequently shows people turning to violence to solve problems.

- Joseph sold into slavery by his own brothers
- The battle between David and Goliath
- John the Baptist beheaded at the instigation of Herodias.
- The denunciation of Jesus by his countrymen and co-religionists leading to his scourging and crucifixion by the Romans.

In the context of Jesus’ culture, today’s parable of the violent tenants would sound like a real-life possibility.

- Very few farmers of Jesus’ time owned their own land; most were tenant farmers (see John Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Cycle A, p. 145 – 146*)
 - The owner typically received a percentage of the crop.
 - Other obligations and taxes left little for the farmers to care for their families
 - Frustration could lead to bad decisions and spur the farmers to violence.

- Original listeners might well have been surprised that the landowner didn't retaliate with violence after the first delegation was attacked.
 - Cultural mindset that violence is answered with violence

Though Jesus does not say it explicitly in today's gospel

- Yet the parable of the tenant farmers reminds us that violence generates and frequently escalates violence.
- In other New Testament passages Jesus is more explicit on the topic:
 - At his arrest he told his disciples to put away the sword, for those who take the sword will perish by it ([Matt 26:52](#))
 - Maybe more powerful are the Beatitudes in which Jesus notes the blessedness of peacemakers, the meek, and the persecuted – a teaching which provides specific ways to full his great commandments of Love for God and Neighbor.
- Just before we receive the Lord in Holy Communion today, central to the prayer legacy we received from Jesus, we will ask the Father to “deliver us from evil.”
- Praying for God to shield us from the evil of violence that surrounds us is valuable
 - As well as praying that God deliver us from the potential for violence that resides within us.
- But besides avoiding violence, we are also a people called to work for peace.
- In his 1972 message for the celebration of the Day of Peace, Pope Paul VI famously said, “if you want peace, work for justice.”
- Today we commit ourselves again to stand against violence in every form, and to build peace wherever we can by working for justice.

Tags: conflict resolution, peace, psychology, violence

About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.