

AND IT WAS VERY GOOD

Every Easter I've made a habit of re-reading an essay titled "Wood, Nails and Colored Eggs." It's written by Martin Bell, a Presbyterian minister, and is included in his wonderful book of essays, stories, poems and songs called *The Way of the Wolf*.

I am drawn to the essay because it powerfully describes the human condition, and ultimately offers up a word of hope. But it begins with a very somber reminder of how often we fall short.

Bell writes: "Something like an eternity ago, human beings got all caught up in the illusion that being human is a relatively unimportant sort of proposition. Here today—gone tomorrow. A vale of tears—that sort of foolishness.

"What's more tragic, of course, is that in the wake of this basic error there quickly followed the idea that human beings are expendable, which quickly degenerated into the proposition that some human beings are expendable. Certain human beings are expendable. Really bad guys . . . Guys with low IQs . . . anyone who disagrees with me" (83)

A quick survey of history proves Bell to be quite right. Over the centuries there are hundreds—thousands—of examples of how certain human beings have been deemed unnecessary. Sometimes it has been children or women. Often those in minority groups. Perhaps the worst example was found in the last century in the Holocaust.

Never in human history have so many people bought into the idea that certain human beings are expendable. For Hitler and the Nazis Jews were expendable. Gays were expendable. Communists and union leaders were expendable. Folks with developmental disabilities were expendable.

And so 6,000,000 were slaughtered.

And when it was finally exposed, the world said "Never again." Never again will we treat others as expendable.

But, as events over the past few weeks have demonstrated, we are still caught up in the illusion that being human is unimportant, that some folks still believe certain people are expendable.

We heard it on the airwaves, as a group of young black female athletes were denigrated in the name of making a buck. We saw it on a college campus, as a young man who had been marginalized came to hold other people in such contempt

that he could randomly pick them off with gun fire. We saw it in a distant land as a government painted planes a neutral color so as to be able to continue its systematic killing of thousands of people deemed second class.

Some folks still believe certain people are unimportant, second-class, even expendable.

But it's not true.

From the beginning of time, our scripture lesson reminds us, it has not been true.

In the poetic telling of the creation myth, the authors of Genesis, tell us over and over again, that God saw what God had made, and proclaimed it very good. All of it. The sun, the moon, the stars. The sea, the sky, the land. The animals, the fish, the birds. And human beings. Male and female. All, very good. All very essential. All a part of God's creation.

As the seven day story unfolds, each and every day, God looks at what has been made, and declares it good. Very good.

And none of it is expendable. We need the sun, the moon, the stars. We need the sea, the sky, the land. We need the animals, the fish, the birds. And we need each other.

One of the reasons I like Bell's essay so much, is because he affirms that so clearly.

Do you think that some people are expendable, "Well," he writes, "that's not true. It's wrong. All wrong. From the creation of the heavens and earth, it has been wrong Our lives have eternal significance. And no one, absolutely no—is expendable." (Ibid)

Now some may feel I'm being rather harsh, including the thoughtless, racist remarks of a radio personality in my earlier list. But that's always where it starts. The Holocaust didn't begin with mass arrests. It didn't begin with executions. It began with speeches and a book that denigrated Jews. It began with name calling and slurs and characterizations. How we talk about people soon becomes how we think about people. And how we think about people becomes how we treat them.

And some may say I'm letting a killer off the hook by suggesting that his being marginalized by others led to his violent rampage. Don't misunderstand; I'm not suggesting there is any excuse for gunning down thirty-two people. But I am suggesting that when we treat others as unimportant, when we make fun of them because of how they talk, or how they look, or where they are from, it can lead to unthinkable violence. We saw it at Columbine, we saw it in Blacksburg . . . and we have seen it countless other places as well.

And some may think I am being political by even brining up the genocide in Darfur. Especially in light of the fact that a presidential statement was issued just this week about the situation there. But the truth is thousands and thousands have died in part because Western nations have largely turned their backs on the situation, and have let stand the idea that certain people, poor African people, are expendable.

But they are not. No one is expendable.

Fortunately, there are those who haven't bought into the lie.

Coach Vivian Stringer and the members of her basketball team haven't bought into the lie. They refuse to believe it about themselves, and they even refuse to believe it about their detractor. While they could have called Don Imus names, could have labeled him a bigot, an ignoramus or worse, they had the wisdom, to agree to sit down with him, hear him out. They had the wisdom to tell him just how much remarks like his hurt. They refused to believe that they are expendable—but they didn't make him expendable in the process. And that takes courage.

Professor Liviu Librescu didn't buy into the lie either. He was a survivor of not only the Holocaust, but persecution in Romania after the war, when he refused to take an oath of allegiance to Nicolae Ceausescu. He fled to this country, and for the last twenty years taught engineering at Virginia Tech. One could hardly blame this man driven from one country to another by hatred, if he felt great anger towards other people. But he didn't, and last Monday, when Cho Seung-Hui was making his way down the hall of Norris Hall and approaching Professor Librescu's classroom, he quickly closed the door. Then he ordered his students to flee the scene and scurry out the windows, while he used his own body to keep out the gunman. Lives were saved by his heroic action, but not his own. Ironically, Monday was also Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom Hashoah.

And Eric Reeves refuses to accept the lie. He's also an academic—a professor of English literature at Smith College. He's been speaking out about the tragedy in Darfur since 1999. He was, in fact, one of the first to describe the violence there as genocide. Professor Reeves has used phone calls, e-mail and web pages to inform the public and to challenge our government to respond to the horrors being perpetrated in the Sudan. He too has reason to be somewhat bitter—and an excuse for not being involved. He has leukemia. But, as Nicholas Kristof noted in the *Times*, he has been one of the key leaders in building public awareness, “sometimes from his hospital bed.” (New York *Times*, 5-7-06) When it was Christians being slaughtered, he spoke up. When it was Muslims being killed, he kept up his efforts.

Black, or white or brown, male or female, Christian, Muslim or Jew—no one is expendable. No one is unimportant. From the beginning of time, from the first days of creation, the heavens, the earth and all that dwell therein, are deemed by God to be very good.

In the midst of all the tragic news of the past few weeks, the celebration of Jackie Robinson's entry into Major League baseball sixty years ago got somewhat underplayed. His courage in breaking the color barrier cannot be overstated. He faced a great deal of abuse and mistreatment in those early years. But he too faced it with dignity and restraint. He never once lowered himself to the level of his detractors. He didn't see himself as expendable, and he refused to suggest that even his most vociferous critics should be treated as trash. He once said, "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me . . . all I ask is that you respect me as a human being." (www.jackierobinson.com)

That in a nutshell is what it's all about. Respecting one another as human beings. Regardless of our differences, regardless of our disagreements. For no one, absolutely no one, is expendable.

It is why we bring children like Lauren to be baptized before they can do anything morally good or bad, before they can contribute to society. We sprinkle them with water and declare, this child, like all human beings, is loved by God. This child is important for no other reason than she or he is created by the same God who declared creation itself to be very good.

OK—you may be saying—we get the point. And I imagine you do. But clearly our world has not. And so, as long as there are folks who think it is OK to call people denigrating names, as long as there are Blackburgs and Darfurs, as long as we think religion or race or gender or sexual orientation changes a person's worth, as long as some human beings, certain human beings, are deemed unimportant, we who worship the God of all creation, need to keep saying it over and over and over again. Not just saying it, but living it as well.

Non one—absolutely no one—is expendable.

On this Earth Sunday, it is one of the best things we can do not only for the human race, but for the whole planet as well.

For it was, and is very good. Very good indeed.

**Amen
John H. Danner**

