

Our Role in God's

PEACE PLAN

WE CAN EVEN BRING LIGHT TO THAT DEEP, DARK PLACE CALLED TERRORISM

Carole St. Laurent

ur series on peace, which we began in January with "Lighting the Way to Interfaith Peace," now examines ways to counter one of the darkest of dark places—terrorism—with the peace of Christ.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Jesus experienced the full onslaught of evil, and although it killed his physical body, God resurrected him, body and soul. Let's venture forth, praying for God's peace "that surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), reflecting on God's word that guides us into all truth (Psalm 119), and entrusting the bodies of the victims of terrorism to God who will resurrect them on "the last day" (John 6:40).

It's impossible to write about terrorism in America without acknowledging the act of terror that seared the American psyche and unleashed the war on terror that continues to be waged today: 9/11. Since September 11, 2001, regrettably, many terrorist incidents have occurred in

Part 2

OF A FOUR-PART

SERIES

North America and around the world, committed by Americans and citizens of other countries, by individuals and groups. Terrorists act for reasons of religion, race, politics, or seemingly for no reason in particular.

How can we, as followers of Jesus, counter terrorism with God's peace? I believe a holistic response begins with preventing as much terrorism as possible. When terrorism does occur, we must hold perpetrators to account without disproportionate retribution which only escalates the cycle of violence. Our memorials must honor victims "rightly" according to Miroslav Volf, founder and director of Yale Center for Faith and Culture, while also contributing to the healing of survivors and societies. We must obey Jesus' command to love our enemies while protecting future victims. It is challenging, but it is one of the hottest crucibles in which to purify and demonstrate true Christianity. It may take generations and sacrifices, but that's how Jesus founded the church—on the cross and with no force against opponents except love and good deeds.

## "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN** 

It's not our imagination. There have been numerous terrorist attacks in the last few years. It is unusual for

modern Western civilizations to fear random acts of violence. However, being victims of violence was a common occurrence for the early church. Jesus' reaction to the violence of his own death, and the apostles' reactions to persecution, give us clear biblical

teaching on a godly response to violence.

First, God loves righteousness and hates evil (Psalm 5:5-7). We also are commanded to "hate what is evil, hold on to what is good" (Romans 12:9). The killing of innocent victims is abhorrent to God and

humanity. God wants us to work for peace, but the means, as well as the end, must be aligned with God's will. Romans 12:14-21 shows us how:

Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Rather, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.

Be noble, do not retaliate, live at peace, feed your enemies, conquer evil with good. God's response is contrary to human nature! It is more natural to retaliate decisively so your enemies will be afraid to attack again. But is this how terrorists are likely to respond? It's more likely they would want revenge and to prove they cannot be stopped. The only logical outcome is an escalating cycle of violence. The prognosis is as bleak for trying to enforce peace by war—beyond the death and destruction the war would cause, imposing a bloody "peace" does not win hearts and minds. It simply justifies and provokes more conflict. It is impossible to reap peace from war or produce love from hate.

God's response is contrary to human nature, but it is not counterintuitive to see that love is the only path to peace. At the community or country level, seeking solutions through dialogue prevents the need to resort to violence. Suppressing dissention through coercion is not peace, it's oppression, and will not produce sustainable peace. Instead, as Abraham Lincoln said, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

God's plan for peace is supernaturally difficult: to love and care for our enemies. The formerly hotheaded St. Peter taught, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:9-11). As Peter did, we may experience that inheritance in heaven rather than earth. This is radical, supernatural, but God-enabled love. This is the Christians' war on terror. It cannot be waged with hateful words or brute force, but with service, blessing, and self-sacrifice. And when the ultimate sacrifice is paid, the response must eventually be forgiveness. This does not preclude God's agents, governments, from punishing terrorists justly (1 Peter 2:13-17), but it does preclude retaliation, collective punishment and ill will. This leaves the maximum room for winning the most hearts and minds for peace.

Even as a Christian peacebuilder I struggle to love people who commit terrorism, especially against children. Researching the causes of terrorism, I discovered some surprising motives. My friend Jean Paul Samputu became a victim of mass terrorism when his family was killed in the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. He was devastated to learn his best friend Vincent had killed his father. However, when Jean Paul learned that Vincent was forced to kill his closest friend or be killed, he realized how "genocide can create a monster from any of us." Digging deeper, there are many root causes for the genocide, and many missed and denied opportunities to prevent it. I felt so incensed and implicated in the West's inaction that I wrote a poem of apology for the Rwandan people: Cry Rwanda—A Prayer for the People. Visit crypeace.org to read it.

In Uganda, a former child soldier of the Lord's Resistance Army confessed to me that he had killed to avoid being killed, hanging his head in remorse. While he did kill, it was clear to me that he was a victim forced to commit atrocities. I felt nothing but compassion for him. Digging deeper, what turned Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, into a Christian fanatic wrecking terror on villages? Could colonialism, racism, economic oppression or false Christian teachings be root causes (his parents were Catholic and Anglican and he purported to be establishing a theocracy)?

One of the most difficult terrorist acts to understand is religiously motivated murder. How can one child of God kill another child of God in the name of God? I began to understand this a little more when a former Taliban fighter came to preach at my church. He joined the Mujahadin ("holy warriors") at age fourteen in Afghanistan for food and the means to protect his family. What child should have to choose between being hungry and scared or being a fighter? After the Taliban invaded, he joined them.

The Taliban taught him that sacrificing himself or killing for God was true devotion, but doubts made him search the Quran for answers.

God drew him to Christianity, and he fled for his life. Now he ministers to Afghanis in Toronto. Force did not change him from killing for God to being willing to die for God—truth and love did. Unfortunately, some Christians also believe that sacrificing oneself or killing for God is justified in some situations. In North America, some terrorists have been motivated by the hatred of people of different faiths or to protest abortion. We must vehemently oppose any interpretations of the Bible that

condone racial supremacy, bigotry, religious hatred, or violence. Killing in the name of God or Allah is equally abhorrent. As mainline Muslims are best able to counterradicalize Islam, mainline Christians are best able to counter hatred in the name of Jesus. More than that, we can use the strategies shared in "Lighting the Way to Interfaith Peace" to build positive perspectives and relationships with people from other faiths.

Prevention is ideal, but how do we follow Christ once terrorism has happened? We obey God and follow the example of those who have gone before. Anger ate away at Jean Paul Samputu for years until it almost destroyed him. He finally obeyed God's prompting to forgive, which dramatically changed his life ("forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us" Luke 11:4). Joy filled his heart, as it fills his eyes today when talking about forgiveness. More than the path to personal peace, Jean Paul calls forgiveness "the most powerful underutilized

weapon against terrorism and atrocities." He reconciled with Vincent when he publicly forgave him at a traditional gacaca court in Rwanda. The pair began promoting the message of repentance and forgiveness. It was not easily accepted, even in churches. Jean Paul believes this is because it is difficult, and one cannot preach what one does not do. But forgiveness saved his life, and helped him touch many more. Forgiveness starts the healing of ourselves and our relationship with our enemy.

### Take Action

- Meditate on the Prince of Peace, and pray to become increasingly like him in your heart, mind, words and actions. Consider reading about St. Teresa of Calcutta for inspiration. To explore applicable titles, visit Liguori.org.
- **Commit to doing five positive things** for humanity for every one act of terrorism. To get started, check out this app: madforpeace.com.
- Are there situations in your life where you or others are fighting hate with hate? How could you turn things around to win love with love?
- our culture glorifies violence in entertainment and gaming. This can damage our spiritual health. **Consider healthier alternatives** for you and your family to enjoy.
- Condemn terrorist actions, attitudes, and the injustices that incite terrorism, rather than people groups. *Use sensitive language that builds bridges*, not walls.
- Counter words of hatred, division, and violence with words of peace, truth, and love. Be especially vigilant to counter hate that people justify using the Bible.
- Consider serving with Pax Christi Christian Peacemaker teams. To learn more, visit paxchristi.net.
- Promote zero tolerance for hate and violence in your family, church, school, and workplace.

  The World Council of Churches has an extensive list of resources. To learn more, visit oikoumene.org.
- If you see bullying taking place, intervene.

  Resources for parents and tips to build positive relationships are available at kidsareworthit. com.

# "For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities."

-EPHESIANS 6:12

And sometimes, miraculously, they become friends.

God also commands us to love (Romans 12:9). Gill Hicks, who survived a suicide bombing in London, says, "What has shaded me from hatred and wanting retribution, what has given me the courage to say, 'This ends with me,' is love. I was loved. I believe the potential for widespread positive change is absolutely enormous because I know what we're capable of....Is what unites us not far greater than what could ever divide us? Does a tragedy or a disaster have to occur for us to feel connected as one species, as human beings?" Gill's experience of the love of strangers was so powerful it countered even the hatred of a terrorist. And with God's strength, prayer, and deep understanding, we too can work to find compassion and love even for terrorists.

God commands us to serve even our enemies (Romans 12:20). Individuals can serve with organizations such as Pax Christi or Christian Peacemaker Teams, by donating financial resources, time, and talents. Clergy and laity can pray for victims, provide childcare or healing through arts and play programs. Youth and adults can be riend and support victims. I'm exploring ways to use my digital storytelling skills to strengthen empathy in Iraq. One unique gift the Church can offer is Bible studies and discussion groups on forgiveness, healing, love and eternal hope.

Politically, we can advocate that the government move its policies, budgets and programs in the direction of God's peace plan. Not only is it biblical, but it's a step to build sustainable peace that is cost effective.

Finally, we must overcome evil with good to the extent of forgiving terrorists and seeking their restoration because God demonstrated such radical, restorative, healing love on the cross. Indeed, that was its purpose. When Paul implores us, like Christ, to become "living sacrifices," this is precisely the way he calls us to do so (Romans 12:1-21). "For our struggle is not with flesh and blood

#### Learn More

- Get inspired by how to use dialogue and empathy to counter violent extremism at Search for Common Ground. Visit sfcg.org.
- Explore Catholic perspectives on peace through paxchristi.net.
- O Read Jean Paul Samputu's and others' stories at the forgivenessproject.com.
- Learn more about US counterterrorism resources and nonviolent alternatives for sustainable peace through allianceforpeacebuilding.org.
- Read more stories about terrorism and find additional counter terrorism resources at crypeace.org/countering-terrorism.

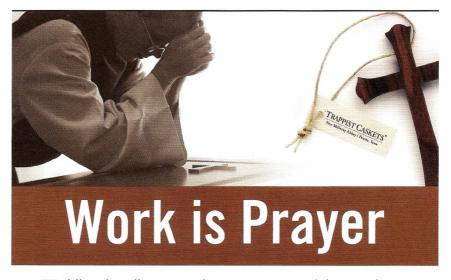
but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens" (Ephesians 6:12). It is evil we are condemning, not people. Jesus' death offers restoration for all.

I pray that neither you nor I will ever suffer an act of terrorism. If we do, may Christ's peace console us, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. With God's help, may we heal, forgive, and learn to love our enemies. May the leaders of all nations realize that violence begets violence, and love begets peace. Pray for God's direction as you seek your role in implementing God's peace plan. #



Carole St. Laurent is an award-winning specialist in information and communication technologies.

Her organization, CryPeace.org, nurtures empathy and peace by sharing stories from around the world, including Rwanda, Uganda, Israel, Cyprus, and



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