

Year A, Ascension Day
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What Kind of Power Clothes Us?

We had terraces on our hilly farm in Nebraska. Sometimes when I was returning home from school I would run down the hills and jump from the very top of those terraces. I would soar through the air for twelve or fifteen feet and land again on the run. That night in my dreams, I did not come down and could soar forever. In my supreme power, gravity lost its effect and I would float through the air in effortless glory. My power was limitless and sometimes cruel. Is this the power Jesus meant when he said “you have been clothed with power from on high?”

How many of you have followed the story of Elliot Rodger of Santa Barbara, California? Michael Hardin blogged on this. He wrote:

A few days ago a despondent and depressed young man, Elliot Rodger, killed 6 people in southern California. He left a video behind chronicling his anger and resentment. ... He sounds an awful lot like the god who is preached from so many American pulpits: a deity who when scorned becomes a vengeful, hateful, spiteful Judge and Executioner.

The logic of this kind of thinking is structured deeply within the American psyche; it is not Christian. (It did not come from Jesus) In the video, Elliot Roger says:

"If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you. (laughs) You denied me a happy life, and in turn, I will deny all of you life. (laughs) It's only fair.

I hate all of you. Humanity is a disgusting, wretched, depraved species. ...You deserve to be annihilated and I'll give that to you. You never showed me any mercy and so I will show you none."

(And then Michael asks,) How this is any different from, "If you don't accept Jesus as your Savior, I will destroy you. You denied me satisfaction, and in turn, I will deny all of you life."

In response to Michael's blog Adam Ericksen wrote an article entitled: **Alpha Gods at the University of California: Redeeming Theology**. It appeared on the Raven Foundation website and I want to quote it:

The horror of last Friday's (a week ago Friday) murders at UCSB has us asking the all-important question: Why did this happen?

Of course, we ask the same question whenever violent tragedies like this grip the nation. Our first answer is usually the same one provided by Santa Barbara County Sheriff [Bill Brown](#) just after Friday's rampage: "It's obviously the work of a madman."

I wish the answers to tragic shootings were that easy. Elliot Roger had psychological issues, no doubt, but it would be a mistake to isolate his issues to his own personal "madness." What makes Roger actions so scary is that he is a product of the American theology of violence.

Anyone who has heard Roger's recorded rant will know the demonic theology behind his actions. If you dismiss Roger's statements about becoming a god and his "Day of Retribution" as hatred coming from the lips of a madman, then you have to dismiss 90 percent of American Christian theology.

American Christian theology is mad in the same way as Roger. Roger claimed that he had been rejected by women and by men, and because they rejected him, he felt justified in rejecting them. He was rejected by the "alpha-males" and he was rejected by women. His resentment stewed; he wanted to become just like those he hated; he wanted to be an "alpha-male." He looked to them and imitated their violent methods of being alpha-males. And the only way to become an alpha-male is through violence.

Here is where theology has failed. The message that we often hear is that if you reject God, God will reject you. God is the ultimate Alpha-Male; a domineering Father who wills His way with power and violence. And you should be afraid of this God. In fact, fear is often the motivator for evangelism.

Roger's statements reveal that he was a product of that madly demonic theological message. Those who preach that message about God must repent of that message or such tragedies will only continue. Please notice that even outside the confines of a religious setting, theology matters. It doesn't matter whether Rogers considered himself a Christian or not, American Christian theology is implicated in this tragedy because Rogers' violent theology is virtually identical to the violence that runs through American Christian theology.

Redeeming American Theology

In the New Testament, the word "repent" means to "change one's mind." When Jesus asks us to repent, he wants us to change our mind about God. We need a theological shift, and one person leading the way is Michael Hardin. In his book [The Jesus Driven Life](#), Michael states that he tries, "to refer to the Bible as much as possible in this book, for what is ultimately being proposed is a theological shift that could affect American Christianity to its core."

Michael proposes a theological shift that takes the violence out of the core of American Christianity. He does this not, as he states, by ignoring the Bible and Christian tradition. Rather, he makes the shift by delving deep into the Bible and tradition, and specifically, into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus, Christian tradition tells us, was fully human and fully divine. In other words, Jesus reveals what it means to be both fully human and fully God. Notice that in Jesus there is no violence. Jesus does not reveal that the way to be fully human is to be a violent alpha-male or that God is a violent alpha-god who violently rejects those who reject him. Rather, Michael claims that “we must begin our theology with Jesus and not some abstract definition of God.”

This point cannot be overstated when it comes to redeeming American Christianity. Jesus did not come as an alpha-male. Jesus flips our view of manhood upside down. To be fully human is not to hold power over and against others, but to live a life of service to others. Jesus says that the “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” The alpha-male wants to be served. The Truly Human one serves through love and nonviolence.

Jesus also flips our view of God upside down. If God is like Jesus, then God is the Spirit of service, love and nonviolence, who lovingly forgives even God’s enemies. There is no violent alpha-male in God!

To make the point, Michael directs us to the cross. Humanity’s ultimate rejection of God is seen on the cross. But did God respond to that ultimate rejection by rejecting those who rejected him?

No, in fact, God forgave those who rejected him.

American Christian theology, with its violent god who rejects those who reject him, is implicated in the murders that happened Friday a week ago. Those of us who call ourselves Christians must repent from that theology. We must change our minds about a violent god. We must take responsibility for doing our part in redeeming theology so that it begins to look much more like the fully human and fully divine Jesus than the violent and idolatrous god of our own making.

We return now to the soaring boy exhilarated by power. What kind of power does the Father promise us? Why, it’s the power to love and forgive; not an easy thing, the same power he gave Jesus. This is the power Jesus gave us when one week after his Ascension, on The Day of Pentecost, God sent us the Holy Spirit. That’s what the Holy Spirit is! It is the power to love and forgive and we can do that now, now that Jesus is in Heaven and praying for us at the right of God. Now that Jesus is in heaven his power lives in us, not just Him, and he wants us to use it. It is because he is in heaven that we can imitate him. If he were too close we would more likely be in rivalry with him. But being in heaven, he is way above that.

This is the power the disciples saw when Jesus opened their minds to understand the scripture.
This is the power we are to witness to with our lives no matter where we are in our lives.
Amen

Prayer:

Help us let go of bully power and catty power that works to humiliate and coerce. Pull us toward the power to love and forgive even when it is hard. Help us to know that Jesus is praying for us at your right hand and that even we can do this. In Jesus name. Amen.