

Frank Morris owned a shoe shop in Ferriday, Louisiana - a small town in Concordia Parish where my father had grown up.

We had moved back to Concordia Parish in the summer of 1963, when my father became Superintendent of Education for the parish schools - we lived in Vidalia, across the Mississippi River from Natchez and next door to Ferriday.

Frank Morris was black, and in the early morning of December 10, 1964, his shop was torched, and so was Frank Morris, who had a bedroom in the back of his shop.

He died four days later, only saying that he saw two white men whom he thought were his friends, but never revealing their identity.

By all accounts, Frank Morris was respected by both blacks and whites, each comfortable enough to wait together inside his shop for their shoe repairs.

In 1964, maybe that breach of the racial barrier was reason enough for the Ku Klux Klan to act against Frank Morris.

That was the year of Freedom Summer as hundreds of young people rode buses into Mississippi to work for civil rights, and the Klan had announced they would retaliate, and three civil rights workers were killed in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

A year later, in the fall of 1965, two Federal Marshalls sat in our living room in our house in Vidalia.

Bloody Sunday in Selma was in the spring of that year. The Voting Rights Act had just been signed in August. Tensions had escalated in Concordia Parish as the school system was being sued to desegregate.

The Marshalls were in our living room because we were receiving phone calls - threats against my father, our family if he let the schools integrate - because I had a deep voice, and when they asked for Mr. Lancaster and before I could finish saying ‘just a minute, I’ll get him for you’ the verbal tirade would begin.

It was an assault, a violation - our homes may not be a castle, but they are, however grand or humble, a sacred space... and the Marshalls were in our living room to talk to us about what to do if something was thrown through a window or burned in the yard.

My job was to get my baby sister - I was fifteen and she was two - she and my other sister each had a bedroom on the front of the house facing the street - my brother and I had our bedrooms across the hall from them, on the back of the house.

I was to get her, and then go back through my room and through the window into the back yard - making sure no one was there, and go to the big ditch behind our house.

Nothing ever happened, except for the phone calls and letters my father received, some cars that would drive by and around the corner and then come back by slowly.

No, something did happen - from that night on for the past fifty years, I have lived with the reality that there is no escape plan for the violence that drives through my life, walks up my driveway, knocks on my door every day.

Church insurance companies now offer assistance for “active assailant emergency planning” because of the Charleston shootings.

Before I left Austin, SafePlace, an organization that provides support for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and exploitation, reported they had expected to perform about 100

sexual assault exams for the year, but in just four months, nearly 250 women had come to them after being sexually assaulted.

A man throws a bomb into a Wal-Mart in Tupelo, Mississippi because they won't sell Confederate flags.

Verbal bombs attack our sincerity and sensibility, assault our self-respect or sexuality, as people try to sell us their indefensible immorality.

Military bombs destroy homes in Aleppo and five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, who should be at home asleep, sits silently in the ambulance, dust covered, wiping the blood running down his face.

The parents of six-year old Jacob Hall, who should be tucking him into bed, are crawled up next to him in his hospital bed as he lays dying, shot while playing in the school yard as the day began at Townville Elementary School in South Carolina.

Keith Scott and Charlotte, North Carolina; Police Officers in St. Louis and Los Angeles; Sandy Hook School and Virginia Tech; Michael Brown and Tamir Rice; Paris and Nice, New York City and San Bernardino; Chicago streets and Athens, Georgia neighborhoods; Refugees marching through Europe; Missiles Dropped on Hospitals in Afghanistan; Demolished Homes in Palestine; Uninsured, Unemployed; Sex Trafficking, Battered Wives, Addicted Husbands, Abused Children...

This rain of never-ending violence gives way to a rising flood of fear that sweeps away the foundations of our lives, leaving shattered memories of hope and home.

Flannery O'Connor took the title of her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* from our text in the gospel of Matthew.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force..."

But to what," said Jesus, "shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" (Mt. 11:12, 16-17)

Perhaps that's the best way of saying what some of us experience... The violent will pipe and expect us to dance to their tune.

So we try to make sense of the violence; we wring our hands and shake our heads. And we seem to always come to the same conclusion: They are monsters.

We somehow forget that they, like us, are children of God and were created in God's image and it is their actions that are monstrous.

As someone pointed out to me, "We ask questions like: How could he do such a thing? We need to be asking (she said): How is my complacency in a culture of violence resulting in the death of members of my community?"

It is our moral imperative to stand against acts of violence, and we cannot turn a blind eye to the institutional practices, the policies of injustice, or the social lifestyles that people lead which equip us for acts of violence.

And it begins, as Walter Wink noted, "The roots of violence lie deep within us... (he says) "Every outer evil inevitably attracts from our own depths parts of ourselves that resemble it."

Our moral eye should turn inward for it is true that we are children of wrath.

If we resist violence with violence, we simply become what we resist... and what is required in the way of Jesus is a spiritual act, the courage to face the demons within, the inner darkness where I hide the killer, the torturer, the assailant in me - the one who burns the buildings in another's world - economic, military, verbal, social, emotional.

I am helped here by the late Anwar el-Sadat's words concerning peace with Israel - very much a journey into the shadows of the valley of death.

In his autobiography, he wrote: *What was it then that I needed to change? We had been accustomed (a whole generation had been brought up to regard Israel as taboo... [So] he who cannot change the very fabric of his thought will never be able to change reality.*

For some this is more than difficult and they would prefer to fight fire with fire - to dance to the tune of the violent bearing it away.

No, the way of peace in the name of Jesus Christ is a gift - a freedom not that we secure peace before God, but something we are able to do when we realize that the power of God is greater than the power of death.

We cannot expect to be the salt of the earth and then do nothing to change the blandness of our belief that peace is impossible among all God's children!

We cannot be the light of the world and then do nothing to change the darkness that justifies our own power and privilege to remain content with things as they are!

Because Elie Wiesel was right: *"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe."*

And we reach that center of the universe through the cross - not an escape plan, but the entry into a way of life that reveals the outcome of what God has prepared for us.

We enter a way of life created for us in Jesus Christ, in which we each have a part to play with our brothers and sisters in Christ in proclaiming the unifying, peacemaking love we have seen in Jesus.

We enter a way of life in which pain, sorrow, and despair will always find compassion, joy, and hope.

We enter a way of life in which the weak will always share in the strength of the strong; a world free of greed, war, hunger, poverty, and agony.

We enter a way of life in this world in the name of Jesus Christ in whose love all things are possible!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.