



continuous conversion

THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY IS RIPPED

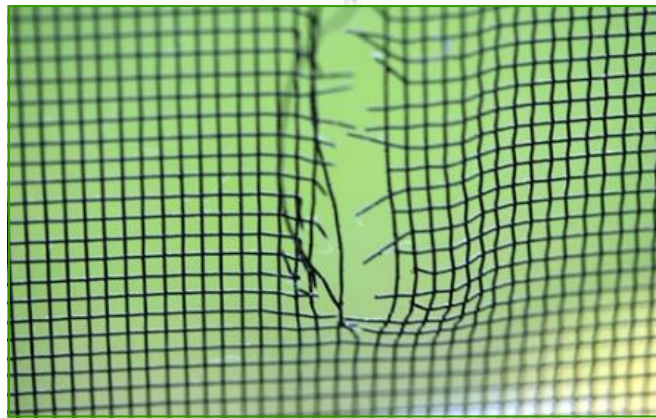
BY SARA TUSEK

Any evening you can watch the news on American TV and get an update on that day's mayhem. From the personal and local (robbery, rape, murder) to the impersonal and international (car bombing, land mines, unmanned drones) there is plenty of evidence every evening that the world is a dangerous, violent place.

For a Christian, this outpouring of evil should not be surprising. The theme of the Bible is man's sinful nature and his need for a redeemer—Jesus. Jesus told His followers in John 3:19:

"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

Evil has existed since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden. The question is, though, in recent years, has evil become more open? And can anything be done to stop its spread?



RIPPED

Was the past a safer time?

In the U.S., there is a nostalgia for an earlier, more peaceful time, when you could trust your neighbor and leave the doors unlocked. There is an outraged cry in American society that the social contract has been illegally voided. The agreement that civilized people make to live according to the rules, obey the laws and not act with unrestrained greed and malevolence toward each other has been frayed beyond repair. The social fabric is ripped wide open, according to this analysis. People long to return to a safer time.

The problem is that there is little agreement on how to return to a previous state of social stability (if indeed such a time of trust ever really existed). If the scope and power of evil has increased

in the world, why has this happened and how can it be changed? How can we change things back to what they were?

What changed?

It can be argued that the people who believe that America used to be a safer, saner place were simply insulated in the past from the crime and distress that was always in America. Economic and racial segregation pushed some people down into a hopeless, helpless position from which the American dream of bettering oneself and giving one's family a more prosperous future seemed utterly unattainable. These downtrodden people were hidden in run-down neighborhoods where middle- and upper-class Americans didn't see them, making the social lower classes essentially invisible and maintaining the fiction that everyone was doing just fine.

But underneath and within the stratifications, change was beginning to bubble. The social changes that converged upon the U.S. after WWII acted as a huge stirring spoon, mixing the layers of class and race into a new hodgepodge of elements. Returning soldiers knew each other as fellow fighters, not solely as members of different races or economic levels; some brought home brides from Japan and Germany, Italy and Africa, bringing change to the U.S. The G. I. Bill provided financial resources for attending college, exposing veterans to a world of new ideas. Americans from families of modest means, sons of farmers and factory workers, noticed that social relations (especially race relations) in other parts of the world were less harsh and restrictive than in many parts of the U.S.

To p. 2

A dream of equal rights for all

These WWII veterans came home changed. Their ways of looking at life were enlarged, and they raised their kids with ideas about fairness and justice for all citizens. Their children, young Americans who valued equality of opportunity and were willing to live out their beliefs started a social revolution in the 1960's. Dr. Martin Luther King is perhaps the best-known example of the courageous people who insisted that the United States, which calls itself a Christian nation, live up to its own constitutional promises.

The idealistic young people of the 60's couldn't have imagined the upheavals that followed their peaceful, church-centered marches and voter registration drives. Social change happened quickly, especially in educational institutions. For some, new equal opportunity laws provided access to the most elite parts of society.

For others, the promise of equal opportunity was not fulfilled—at least economically. Far from being lifted on the tide of social equality and enhanced opportunity, these people fell even lower. In terms of purchasing power, the US. minimum wage, which people of low educational attainment try to live on, has not grown since 1968, and has instead fallen. This means that people whose income is the minimum wage are far less economically well off than their parents and grandparents were in the 1960's.

In the 21st century, recent economic dislocations have thrown millions of people out of work. Those at the bottom of the ladder—the people not equipped with sophisticated skills and employment flexibility—have disproportionately suffered. These people lost their jobs first and will regain them, most economists agree, only after the economic recovery has taken firm root—in 2011 or 2012. This is a long time to wait when your children are growing up with no economic security.

What do you do when your dreams die?

It doesn't take a PhD to understand that the economic and justice systems in the U. S. are stacked against those at its bottom. Millions of American children go to bed hungry every night, have no access to even basic health care, attend inadequate and inferior schools and live in neighborhoods where bullets fly freely at night. These deplorable conditions simply don't exist in most of the economically advanced countries of the rest of the world.

Of course it's theoretically possible for any individual to rise to the top, with sufficient drive and motivation, as well as some very favorable circumstances. And all around us are inspirational and heartwarming examples of people succeeding against great odds.

For others, though, a sense of terrible injustice and unstoppable anger propelled them into expressing rage against the society they saw as oppressive. Their dream, as Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes expresses it in 1951, exploded:

Dream Deferred

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?*

When society is polarized in terms of economic status, and when a large section of society doesn't perceive that it is being treated with fairness and justice, or can better its position, the society will weaken. Crime becomes an attractive alternative to poorly-rewarded work. Weak spots become rips. You can mend one rip, or two, but when the rips become too numerous, the fabric is no longer strong, and the society is no longer safe.

How can evil be stopped?

How to return to safety? The answer is, for Christians, very simple. Feed the hungry—clothe the naked—care for the sick—shelter the homeless. Provide social programs that mend the rips in society, while strengthening the fabric that holds us together. Restore hope, so that despair doesn't turn into hatred and corruption.

Jesus said "*Light has come into the world.*" He is the Light, and His followers, Christians, are also the Light, through His loving power. Although evil men choose darkness instead of light, so that their evil deeds can be hidden, Christians have the ability to shine light into all parts of life, through caring and compassion, and through prayer and petition. The pure power of God will overcome the works of darkness and make society a whole, strong fabric that can't be ripped. Christians can mend the rips by choosing to act as Christ taught, loving their neighbors as themselves. Then the ripped fabric of society can be mended and made whole.