

First thing every Sunday morning I check the news on my phone.
Last week it was so early that news of the Orlando shooting
wasn't yet posted.
So it wasn't until long after church in the sacristy
that I read about the horror unfolding
in that city so many associate with vacation and fun.

There are certain things for which you'll always remember where
you were when you heard about them.
I was downstairs – in the block room of the nursery school –
when I learned about the shootings at Sandy Hook.
Exactly one year ago this past week
I was in San Diego celebrating my son's high school graduation
when the shooting in Charleston took place – in a church,
a place we come for wholeness and peace.

But you know what?
It's also scary to think of all the other mass shootings that
aren't quite so memorable to me.
And isn't it chilling that Orlando is referred to as "the latest" mass shooting,
implying the inevitability of more to come?

God help us, are we really so complacent as to resign ourselves
to these unspeakable tragedies?

Today's scripture says not.

The gospel may include all sorts of vivid details about demons and
a herd of swine hurling off a cliff,
but its basic message is like so many others:
Jesus goes out of his way at some risk to embrace the other.

Here Jesus has just endured a stormy passage across the Sea of Galilee
to get to the "opposite" (and I do mean *opposite*) side
into gentile territory.
He meets a gentile possessed by enough demons to staff

a legion of the occupying Roman army.
This man is so defiled that even the other gentiles reject him.
He's enchained, and dwells in a ritually unclean tomb.
Little wonder that when Jesus casts out the demons from him
they land in a herd of swine
(and we know how observant Jews feel about pigs.)

Jesus didn't have to go to this Godforsaken place.
He didn't have to bother with this wretched man.
But Jesus was so filled to overflowing with God's healing love
that he couldn't help but help this man.
Jesus didn't see him as "the other",
but as another *Child of God*.

Our namesake St. Paul got this.
And he wrote it in his letters to the early Christians,
as in today's passage to the Galatians:
"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male or female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

These differences might describe us,
but they don't ultimately define us before the only identity
that really matters.

And so, we can never resign ourselves to mass shootings --
because they belie the fact that every human is a precious child of God.
We can never resign ourselves to acts of terror --
because they are meant to make us cower in fear of one another,
and that's just not who we are in Christ Jesus.

In the name of Jesus, we come together to say that every life matters.
With our friends in Orlando, we say there is no longer gay or straight.

In the name of Jesus, we come together to say that
we don't condemn entire religions or ethnicities.
We reach out to the other as Jesus did,
working side by side to overcome evil together.

In the name of Jesus, we come together to say that
mental health is as important as physical health.
It's time to do away with the stigma and achieve true parity.

In the name of Jesus, we come together to say that
it's long since time we stopped letting criminals and terrorists
outgun law enforcement.

In the name of Jesus, we come together this Father's Day
to say that all of God's children deserve to grow up
with respect and without fear.

In the name of Jesus, we come together this election season,
to challenge those who would be our leaders to inspire us,
in the words of President Lincoln,
to "the better angels of our nature."

And, in the name of Jesus, we come together to show that
thoughts and prayers do make a difference.

I bet I'm not the only one here who's been praying
the prayer attributed to St. Francis this week:
"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."
Lord, use me. Lord, help me do your will.
In other words . . . *put me in, coach!*

"Thoughts and prayers" are not just words issued
by some politician's press secretary.
If you're not really going to offer them, then don't say you are.
But if you do offer thoughts and prayers, well, then
be prepared to *take action*.
Isn't this the dynamic Jesus shows throughout the gospels?

One of the best things I heard during this week of dismal news
was about an orthodox rabbi in Washington DC who
got the news even later last Sunday than I did.
He was observing the Jewish holiday of Shavuot and so
not using any electronics.
It was only walking to synagogue later that afternoon

that a neighbor told him what had happened in Orlando.

Clearly this is a man of tremendous “thoughts and prayers” for he and his congregation decided to go to a local gay bar as a gesture of support.

Not only had he never been to a gay bar before, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in any bar.

But he went inspired by the Jewish tradition of “sitting Shiva” with those who mourn.

“The point”, the rabbi said, “is not that the people who are visiting have answers or a way of removing the pain..., but [it’s] just a way of connecting and saying, ‘we are with you together.’”

There is no longer Jew or Greek.

To which we can only add that beautiful Hebrew word we know so well.

It comes at the end of prayer

to commit us to DO what we’ve prayed.

It’s a word as powerful as it is simple; it means, literally, “so be it.”

The word? *AMEN*.

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