

Thirty-Second Sunday A 2017

Last Sunday we were stunned and horrified as once again unspeakable evil and the life changing misery it created has victimized the unsuspecting. We are sorrowful for the victims and their love ones, and we are at a loss for answers.

One more mass shooting, the 301st in the United States this year alone. Since the beginning of 2016 there have been well over 700 mass shootings in the United States.

Today is not the time and place to discuss societal shifts, motivations, gratuitous violence in the media, gun laws, or any number of issues which may or may not have a bearing on what is clearly a national epidemic. But this is the time and place to come face to face with what it is we do here and maybe why we might want to be a little more present to it and to each other.

These issues are wide and varied and are symptomatic of our increasingly anxious and uncentered society. It is, without a doubt an epidemic. You do not have to be a spiritual epidemiologist to recognize that the pathogen is sin and last week the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs was just the latest outbreak.

In observing the aftermath, watching and listening to the survivors, some things have caught my attention. Things perhaps we should consider.

The first is the witness of faith and perseverance the surviving members have shown. They are thankful people. Deeply wounded and full of pain, but thankful. And why? How can they be thankful in the face of such loss?

From the parable today, it is evident that they have sufficient oil. They have enough oil in reserve to light their way in the darkness. How? Their church is the center of their life. It is not something they also do. In their daily life's decisions, they turn to God first.

They know that they need what he has to offer for them to survive. Their community, while small, is showing the world that despite the evil they have endured, they are not destroyed. They are embracing their Good Friday but not with despair.

If anything, their faith is stronger.

They reminded of the earliest Christian communities who met in fear weekly during the active persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperors. And they had many reasons to be afraid, as these early Christians gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, thanksgiving for the life and love of God.

Back in the days when it was illegal to go to church, stories about Roman soldiers storming places of worship where Christians were systematically slaughtered fill the pages of Church history books. And every time the Church emerged stronger than before, stronger and more committed to a life of faithful discipleship.

Church is the place where we come to transact the business of life and death. Sometimes quite literally. And there are times when “take up your cross and follow me” can be something far more than an abstract biblical challenge.

Where did the people in that church last Sunday get their strength, their faith and even their thankfulness? What source of power do they have to be a thankful people, to be a faithful people in the face of such a staggering tragedy. They were prepared, they had oil in their lamps.

It is obvious that church is the center of their life and when they had to pick up the heaviest cross imaginable, the words of Scripture were no longer just words but true power, power to endure, power to survive and go on. Church for them is clearly not a burden but an endless supply of what is needed to live.

But for many today, church is not that. For many it is a box to be checked off. Another thing on a lengthy list of things to be done...like the grocery store or the bank...

“I hope I don’t see anyone I know...”

“how quickly can I get in and out?”

For those whose relationship with God is like a commodity to be attained or a deposit to be dropped off, it doesn’t make any sense to waste time on non-essentials.

The second thing I observed is how present they are to one another individually and as community. Over, and over again, they talk of one another as “family” as a knit together society that knows, loves and looks after each other. They are thankful for neighbors and friends who stand by one another. They seemed somehow or another to have been prepared for this. They had enough oil.

I get that this is a very small town and typically people are close-knit, but I think we can profit from this observation. As big city dwellers, we tend to live in silos. I would venture a guess that many of us do not know the names of our nearest neighbors. Our worlds, our lives are very much tied up in our own families, schools, work or just ourselves.

The young women in the parable today stand for all of us who seek what Jesus calls a kingdom, all of us who have come to realize that Jesus himself can be the source of meaning and purpose in our lives. The oil for our lamps. He is also for us the Bridegroom and we want to welcome him in our lives and be prepared for the day when he wants to welcome us into his.

Spirituality in human life doesn't just happen. It requires effort, time and attention...faithfulness. And just like any trip we take, we have to make preparations and lay in supplies.

The bible tells us that we prepare for not only our future life with him but also the lives we live right now. That means living not for ourselves but for God and for others. It means pursuing justice instead of exploitation; it means trying to build up peoples and nations rather than tearing them down; it means being more interested in giving than getting.

In the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus warns that those who spurn this wisdom, living for themselves w/o regard for the meaning of life and of God's claims on them, are heading for disaster. They are like the foolish bridesmaids. They made no preparations; assuming that they could always get more oil for their torches whenever they needed it, and that the door of the house would open for them whenever they knocked. Too late they discover that, at the decisive hour, they are unprepared and shut out.

When will the midnight call come for you? For me? Or for our congregation? Jesus himself gives the answer: "You know not the day or the hour." Those words have new meaning and power for the members of First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs.

So, does that mean we have to live tense, always on our tip-toe? That doesn't work... and God never asks the impossible.

Jesus' warning is reason for anxiety only for those who live carelessly and exist thoughtlessly. In verse 9 the wise maidens refuse to share their oil. The fact that there is not enough oil for both groups tells us that faith can never be borrowed. Faith must always be a personal possession and there must be a personal commitment to keeping it alight.

Faith can certainly be caught from someone else. It can be fanned into flame in us by someone else's love and encouragement; but once it flickers into flame in the lamp of our spirit, it needs a commitment from us to keep it burning. If we are ready to make that commitment our life can be transformed.

When we can own for ourselves the words of the psalm today "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." and mean it, then we will have the oil that fuels a life that responds, even in the face of the most unimaginable circumstances, with faithfulness and thanksgiving.

The challenge of the gospel for us today? Start with honestly asking yourself which group of five bridesmaids do you resemble?

Do you have what is needed when your world starts to collapse around you and there is no time left to get more oil?

We are all given the opportunity to prepare. May we have the wisdom to start with giving thanks.

May we pray?

Heavenly Father, our hearts are heavy in sympathy for the those who have lost so much. Our hearts are also full when we encounter great faith and perseverance. Give us strength and courage to fill our hearts and lives with the oil of thanksgiving, generosity and love that come what may, we will stand strong as witnesses of your mercy and peace. We ask this through Christ our Lord.