

“A DAY TO REMEMBER”

Matthew 17:1-10
February 19, 2023
Rev. Jerry Duggins

We are now over seventy mass shootings for the year 2023. That's gun violence incidents involving four or more victims. With the exception of the three in California last month that involved more victims, most are only reported locally. We were made aware of this problem again last week with the shooting in Lansing on Monday. The Presbytery sent out a good mail which included a very appropriate prayer for victims, their families, and our society as we continue to address this issue.

But, of course, we are not really addressing it. We hesitate to even talk about it. There is some compassion fatigue going on here, though we readily agree to pray. It's not really that we feel less empathy for victims, but more that we despair of solutions. If Columbine, Sandy Hook, Orlando, or Vegas couldn't persuade legislators of the need for some structural changes, we have to wonder what will.

I have developed my own cynicisms around this issue. I don't believe the political will exists to really address the broken mental health care system. The notion that guns guarantee freedom is too entrenched in a certain part of our culture. And I'm just not sure what you can do about angry white men motivated by hatred and fear. What seems obvious to me is of course not obvious to everyone. Fix health care, regulate guns, and promote an appreciation for inclusiveness and diversity seems like a good start to me.

But when the shootings happened in Lansing, I wasn't energized to get back in the struggle, I was just tired. Tired mostly because I know it needs talking about, but people don't want to talk about it. I was reminded last week of the wearisome conversation stoppers I sometimes encounter on controversial issues. Someone asked me what you say to a person who tells you that “there are good people on both sides.” So the first thing I think we should recognize is that this statement is a conversation closer. One thing you might be trying to communicate is that “I'm not going to tell you what I think.” It tells me that you don't want to be having this conversation or don't think we should be having it. It's not what you come to church for.

If that's what you're trying to say, just say it, because the other thing implied by “there are good people on both sides,” isn't as nice. You might be lecturing me about being more open-minded, that we should listen to people on both sides. Here's the thing: not all opinions are good. That's why we have conversations. I don't assume that the people who disagree with me are bad, but if I'm actively engaged in an issue, it's because I know that good people are dying every day, sometimes several incidents in a day, from guns. If I'm tired, I'm tired of good people being prayed for and then forgotten, of their unnecessary death failing to move us to do something for the future potential victims.

There are things that happen again and again in our world that just breaks your heart. Maybe it's not gun violence for you. Maybe you're weary of wars around the world. Maybe children trapped in poverty worries you. Maybe it's domestic violence or one of the isms sustaining inequities and injustices in culture. We don't lack reasons for our fatigue.

That's why we worship each week. Sometimes it's respite from a difficult week. Sometimes it refreshes and energizes us for our work in the world. Always, it connects us to the God of love, reminding us that we are all God's children.

That's what Peter, James, and John went up the mountain for with Jesus. They needed a day to remember for the times when things got rough. And they got it. They got a glorified image of Jesus talking to the pillars of the faith, to Moses and Elijah.

Within the Jewish Messianic tradition, it was thought that Elijah would return to announce the coming of the Messiah. He had an illustrious prophetic career. He bested the priests of Baal in a contest between the gods. He healed a Syrian General, he kept a widow miraculously alive during a famine. He even raised a widow's child from the dead. He didn't die himself, but was carried into heaven by a chariot.

He understands us. There was a really bad time in his life. Queen Jezebel was pretty angry about the death of her priests and looking to kill Elijah. He hid out in a cave where God found him. You'll find the story in I Kings 19. When God asks Elijah what he's doing there, he replies, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life...." He's a little tired, so we can forgive him for not having it quite right. When God gave him instructions for setting up the resistance, God concludes with this: "I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal..." He wasn't alone. We aren't alone.

There are excellent therapists helping people cope with depression and anger; good legislators who haven't given up the struggle to reform healthcare or regulate guns; good people overcoming hate with love.

As in Elijah's story, there are days when we might crawl into a cave, days when the wind might be up against us, when an earthquake might shake the ground beneath us, when fire might threaten to destroy us, but God is there in the still small voice, urging us back to work, reminding us that we have companions for this faith journey.

I don't think this was the story that came to the disciples' minds when they saw Elijah. They were probably thinking of Elijah as the preeminent prophet of his day, of the miraculous things he did, of his passion for the Lord's work; but later maybe, hiding out behind locked doors after Jesus' death, feeling all alone, surrounded by danger, maybe they hear that still small voice of the story. Maybe they remember this day when Elijah, who was up against it himself, appeared with Moses and Jesus in a blaze of glory.

Moses, most likely, represented the esteemed tradition of the Law, the bearer of the Ten Commandments. Here is Jesus, shining brightly, bringing together the twin pillars of Jewish faith: the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah. Only you may have noticed from last week's sermon that Jesus wasn't wholly satisfied with the Ten Commandments. "You have heard that it was said, you shall not kill, but I say to you...."

I don't think Matthew intends us to see Moses the Lawgiver here, but the Moses who led the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom. Moses reminds us that God hears prayer. God calls to Moses in the wilderness and tells him, "I have heard the cries of my people."

What we see in this day to remember is not a celebration of the law and the prophets, but an event directing us to God's commitment to deliver us, a declaration that the glory of Jesus centers us in the movement toward freedom.

Things have not been too tough yet for the disciples. They have seen healings, inspiring teaching. They have seen the blind see, the demon possessed cured. But they have also run into opposition. The religious leadership is not happy with Jesus' tendency to work on the Sabbath. They resent his popularity with the people. They will be witnesses to the growth of this resistance, to the powers that enslave. They will see synagogue and state join hands to bring Jesus down. And he will die.

So, here we have a day to remember: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah together... in all their glory. A day perhaps that recalls other days, days when the paralytic not only walked home, but left with his sins forgiven; days when Jesus gave sight to the blind and days when his teaching opened our eyes to a new way of looking at things.

When we are tired, and we will be, the transfiguration may be a day for us to remember, but there are other days that follow worthy of remembrance when our faith flags. Wherever liberation happens, there is a day to remember.

From the cave, we need to remember Francis, who freed himself of riches in order to walk humbly among the poor, and ministered to those who were sick. From the cave, we need to remember the day when Martin Luther refused to recant his understanding of grace, refused to back down from his claims of corruption within the church. We need to remember the words of Theresa of Avila when she reminded us that we are the hands and feet and body of Christ.

When the church has lost its way, sending crusaders to slaughter Muslims, accused good women of witchcraft, or refused to recognize the gifts of God among women or people of various sexual orientations, we need to remember conscientious objectors who went to prison instead of war; we need to remember those who continue to stand up for the convicted until innocence is proven and release achieved; we need to remember the many gay and lesbian people who stayed with the Presbyterian Church until we saw them as children loved and called by God.

When the struggle to end hunger feels futile, we need to remember the efforts of people and organizations who have made possible a real reduction in chronic hunger from 1 in 3 seventy years ago to 1 in 10 today. One day this summer, the Presbyterian Church at its national assembly acknowledged overwhelmingly its complicity in slavery and racism and apologized to people of color today.

I am not naïve. Most days I struggle to be optimistic about the future. But if I am to be a follower of Jesus, and if my commitment is to freedom, justice, and love; I think I will need to focus more on those days when freedom reigns, justice rolls down like mighty waters, and love conquers hate.

The transfiguration doesn't change much, but it gives us the lay of the land. It tells us what Jesus was about. It offers a glimpse of glory. Peter doesn't get to build his booths, to memorialize the occasion; but then, a place to go back to isn't really helpful. The days we want to remember are days that push us forward. The booths we need are built by the work we do. These memories draw us out of the cave. They refresh our souls, renew our commitment, and offer strength for days ahead. It's why we come to church, but more importantly, it's what sends us forth. Amen.