

Lent 5—Year B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:1-13
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

I *had* a sermon already written for today; it was a solid sermon, a perfectly fine sermon, but there is this **line from today’s gospel that would not let me go**—“**Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say...**” The **mass shootings in and just north of Atlanta** this past week **just won’t let me go**. It has *troubled my soul*, and I’m guessing it’s *troubled* a good many of yours as well. And *what should we say?*

First, there are **so many threads** here, and in some part, that’s why **it’s so hard** to know *what to say* or *how to think about it*, but as **people of faith and conscience** we have to **wade into this** and wrestle with it.

I’m going to start with the **thread of race**. While the **shooter professes that these killings were not racially motivated**, the fact remains that **6 of the victims were women of Asian descent**. *As a white woman*, I don’t trust my own ability to **always know how race is playing into my assumptions and motivations**. **Unpacking my thoughts and words and actions in this arena** is always **murky territory** that takes **help from others** and **sustained work to unearth**.

I first started to tune into the recent uptick in **acts of hate committed against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders last May** when **my daughter was writing a paper on this topic**. A **former classmate and friend of hers who is from Canada and of Asian descent** had told her **how tired he was of being told on the subway to go back to where he came from**. She started to research these incidents and learned of the group **STOP AAPI Hate—STOP Asian American Pacific Islander Hate**—who started tracking these incidents **March 19, 2020**.

As of February 28th this year, so one year later, 3,795 incidents of verbal harassment, shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and on-line harassment had been reported with **women reporting 2.3 times more incidents than men**. This is a **vast understatement** because these are **self-reports**. There have been **attacks against elders—women and men in their 80’s and 90’s**. **One recent attack showed a young man rushing from across the street to shove an 84-year old man to the ground who then died of his injuries**. Other **Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders** report **being spit upon and coughed upon**.

Our country has a long and dark history of violence against and mistreatment of people of Asian descent, not just by individuals, but also carried out systemically by our government. And there is no question but that the language used by our former president blaming China for the Coronavirus fueled this animus and explosion of hate incidents in the past year.

It’s heartbreaking.

And the **officer who was the initial spokesman for the Cherokee Sherriff’s Department took the shooter at his word**, that there was **no racism involved here, even while** a post surfaced with

this same officer promoting t-shirts with racist messages linking COVID 19 to China, shirts made by a company owned by a former sheriff's deputy. *While not all officers hold such views, one can understand why communities of color have a hard time trusting law enforcement.*

And then there's the thread of *misogyny and gender-based violence*. These were primarily acts of violence and hate *against women*. I've heard these businesses referred to as spas, massage businesses, and massage parlors, and I'll admit that *my mind* immediately jumped to a judgment that these businesses involved sex work. The reporting since the shootings is mixed on whether or not these businesses were involved in illicit activity, but *the fact that I jumped there says more about me and my assumptions than it does about these businesses*. And even more, if these businesses DO involve sex work, that DOES NOT make those killed LESS of a victim; each of their lives is a human life of *infinite* value.

What we know for sure is that those who work in this part of the service economy are often women working for low wages—so there is also a thread of *class* here—they are often vulnerable and often at risk of exploitation.

The shooter confessed that he struggled with *sex addiction* and indicated that he wanted to kill these people to get rid of *temptation*, and he was headed on to Florida to kill people involved in the pornography industry to eradicate more *temptation* for others. This gets us into *theological areas* that have gone off the rails. A negative view of sex and desire that sees these as inherently sinful and dangerous—and goes something like this: *“Women are the source of temptation—temptation causes me to sin—I must eliminate temptation.”* That *playbook* has been run since male theologians riffed on Genesis 3 and laid the introduction of sin into the world *at the feet of the woman* who gave the fruit to the man with *the man blaming her for eating it*. Don't get me wrong, temptation is a very real thing, but *whatever tempts me out there* is NOT the source of the problem; *what is going on inside here, inside of my own soul*, is what MUST be addressed.

Another tangle of threads has to do with how we look at an *individual and then cast their actions onto a whole group*. So, people of Asian descent are cast as model students, model business people, model citizens OR, *particularly if they're women*, low-wage service workers, sex workers, fragile, and submissive. Asian people are virus vectors. Women are seen as completely pure and virtuous (think Virgin Mary) OR as temptress (think Mary Magdalene who the tradition turned into a prostitute—she wasn't). More examples—Muslims are terrorists, black males are dangerous, sex addicts *and* people who suffer with mental health issues *and* white young men are violent.

But we have to go deeper. People of any racial or ethnic or any other demographic group are individual children of God, made in God's image, precious in God's sight, with unique gifts and histories, with people who love and care for them. *Each* of the victims of this shooting has a unique story and family and friends who are grieving, *including the shooter himself*.

So, we need to resist the temptation to *extrapolate* the acts of a *specific individual out to a particular racial, ethnic, or other demographic group*. Asian Americans are diverse; women are complex and multi-faceted. The vast majority of Muslims are NOT terrorists. The vast

majority of black males are NOT dangerous. The vast majority of people who suffer with sex addiction or other addictions or mental health issues DO NOT commit mass murder. The vast majority of young white males DO NOT then go on to commit mass shootings.

But this is where it gets so tricky and hard. Even as we acknowledge this, at the same time, we have to be able to have some honest conversations about how our culture indeed views women, and racial and ethnic groups, and the privilege and power that males, particularly white males, have historically held.

Yes, not all young white men commit acts of violence, but *when you look at those who do commit mass shootings*, they are often white young men. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a certain type of hatred of women that joins hands with male notions of power that manifests in violence, and when that violence flies out of a gun, there is a multiplying effect that is especially lethal.

What messages are these young men getting that are filling them with such rage and hate? What powerlessness is overwhelming them that makes them want to exercise power over another? Who is willing to teach them what to do with feelings of powerlessness? Who is showing them what it means to yield and surrender and understand that we, ALL of us, are inextricably bound up with one another?

I know it's overwhelming to try to tease out all these threads, to understand them, *and as people who follow the way of Jesus*, to wrestle with *our call* in the midst of them. *But if this last year has taught us anything*, it's that God needs people of courage to risk wading into these places and to name the sin of gender-based violence and race-based violence and xenophobia and notions of supremacy and power *over*, and to bring ALL of this to the cross.

God needs us to confess the hardness in our hearts—whether that be in our words and actions OR in the blind eye we turn as we hear about this suffering; *God needs us*, as Jesus says in this morning's gospel, to “hate our life in this world,” to hate that life that is all wrapped up in notions of power and privilege and position; *God needs us* to let the seeds of this hate die so that the fruit of love and compassion may fill the hunger in our souls.

Jesus is so clear that to *serve him* is to *follow him*, and *following him* will lead us always to the cross where we cannot avert our eyes from the intersection of violence and power and all the ways that humanity finds to crucify love.

This morning, Jesus focuses us like a laser: “Now is the *judgment* of this world; now *the ruler of this world* will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people to myself*.” The text tells us: “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

This “*judgment*” comes from the Greek word κρίσις—the word from which we get *crisis*—and it's a separating, a sundering, a breaking apart. I think this describes what we keep experiencing *in our world* as we reckon with the violence that lives among us. And “*when the ruler of this world is driven out*,” there's some force to expelling the one who rules by wielding *power over*.

And for Jesus, these powers and rulers *aren't ever just* a matter of external forces. What we keep witnessing is just the outward and visible sign of the much more difficult conflicts happening in the inward and spiritual places. *For Jesus*, this *crisis*—this separating and sundering and breaking apart—is *an essential process* that **MUST** take place *in the heart*; it's the *seed* that must fall into the ground and eventually let its *hard exterior* give way so that what is *lifegiving* can take root and grow.

This is not a gentle process. Some things need to be driven out of our heart with some force, and *who ever surrenders anything easily*. We usually get there fighting every step of the way. Some sort of *loss*, some sort of *death*, some sort of a *relinquishment* is a given here. Jesus says as much, *and yet, as he sheds* any notion of *skipping* this journey—*as he understands* that he is **NOT** to be saved from this hour—*as he surrenders* his power and his life, *as he is lifted up on the cross, as his arms are outstretched* and the unfathomable vastness of his heart and love *are laid bare, he makes room* for ALL people, ALL people—*he makes room* for ALL the victims of violence *and* ALL the perpetrators of violence—he makes room for ALL people to be drawn into this love. The *crisis*—the sundering, the separating, the breaking of our heart—is a *breaking open*, an *expanding, to welcome in more*—more compassion, more love, more life.

Whether, like Jesus, our own choices *lead us there*, OR whether the swift and varied changes and chances of life—like a mass shooting or some other unimaginable loss—*drag us there, we are bound for the cross*, and as we *surrender* and *stretch out* our arms, we are *held and sustained* by arms of love that *stood* in that space long before us. In that moment of our *dying* to whatever it is that we have been called to shed, *tendrils of new life* are already *taking root* in the deep places, and in due course, the *tomb* becomes the *womb* and *our heart now made new* breathes life into the world again.

This last year has felt like one long *crisis*, and Holy Week begins in one week reminding us of the *crisis of the cross* that is coming, *but God NEVER wastes a crisis*. As the world falls apart, as all this sundering happens, trust that God has got God's hands deep in your heart, breaking it, softening it, opening it, expanding it. Such tender hearts are far from weak; in fact, *these hearts are the only ones strong enough for the hard work upon us* and the *hard work ahead*.

Don't waste this crisis; let your heart be troubled; let God break your heart and make it new—*and then walk into this crucified world with courage*. Be fearless in speaking what must be spoken, stand with all who suffer, bear the fruit of compassion that has the strength to open one's arms AND the freedom to expose one's heart; walk into this crucified world with courage knowing that **THIS** is where Jesus has planted his love.

While hate may kill the body, it will NEVER succeed in killing that love. Amen.

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