
FIRST, WE CRY: A Response to the Connecticut School Shootings

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**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
The Third Sunday of Advent-Year C**

"Hop on Pop. We love to hop. We love to hop on Pop!"

When they were younger, my children penciled these words onto my Christmas present one year. Those were the days when I believed that wrestling with the kids was the best way to show my affection for them.

You can just imagine how the women in our lives reacted to this.

My present that year was a piece of canvas stretched across an 8 x 10 inch picture frame. The kids decorated the canvas with plastic forks, fabric, newspaper, beads, and painted leaves of various colors. On top of that, they mounted pictures of themselves.

I remember looking at it and thanking the kids. It would go in the closet downstairs with all of the other school projects. I would put it between the picture albums and the donuts-for-Dad notes and cards that had come to mark the passing of each school year.

I guess I thought it would just stay there until we cleaned out the closet one day. Maybe we would share a bottle of wine and tell stories about days gone by before we threw everything out.

Sally had a different vision.

She brought the collage to me a couple of days later and said, "You know, this is one of the nicest presents anyone has ever given to you. They did this for you all by themselves."

She made me look at the piece of art again. And, this time I saw things I had missed before. I saw how bright the smiles were on each of their faces. I saw the missing two front teeth in one of the pictures of Jessie, the braces in David's school portrait, and that look on Peter's face.

Even as a child, Peter seemed to know things about you that you hadn't even figured out yet.

This was an Advent moment for me, a change of heart that prepared the way for the new life to come.

The collage now hangs on the wall at the end of our kitchen. It has become an icon to me of the gift that is each of my children. I look at it every time I open the refrigerator or go into the pantry. And, each time, I feel a new sense of gratitude.

You might say that Sally played the role of John the Baptist in my Advent moment.

Though, to be clear, John the Baptist had a problem that Sally didn't have to face.

The people he was talking to didn't really know what he was talking about.

They didn't understand what he was saying about who God is and how God acts in the world.

You can hear it in his shocking tone.

Flannery O'Connor once said that when your audience doesn't hold the same beliefs that you do, "then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures."

John the Baptist seems to have reached the same conclusion. He tries to shock them into feeling the depth of their vulnerability.

He draws them out into the wilderness, away from the familiar protections of the city and into a place associated with demons and danger.

He challenges their sense of identity, calling them snakes and making it clear that he doesn't care whom their mothers are or what their fathers do.

And then, he tries to show them something about God.

When John is talking about the forgiveness of sins, he isn't making a therapeutic point. He isn't trying to make them feel bad about themselves so that they will appreciate how good God is when he loves them anyway.

He is trying to show them something about their need for each other.

He is talking about something closer to what we might understand as the forgiveness of debt. He is talking about being restored by God to your land, and your family, and your ability to make a living.

You can hear it in what he tells them. His admonitions are all about restoring right relationships, about how we should treat each other if any of us are going to make it to where we are all trying to go.

Listen to what John says. Share with others. Don't be greedy. Be satisfied with your place in the community. Don't put someone else down just to raise yourself up.

Each command has a reciprocal character. John is talking about restoring people to right relationships - with themselves, with God, and with each other.

John is creating an Advent moment for the people. He is leading them into a change of heart that will prepare the way for the new life to come. But, he has a problem. They aren't going to change until they know how vulnerable they already are.

I was more than aware of my own vulnerability on Friday afternoon.

I was at home when I got an email from Sally. "Are you watching the news," she asked. "I can't stop crying."

It didn't take long before my heart was breaking too.

Internet posts about the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut were being updated faster than I could read them.

The numbers were breathtaking. The details were too gruesome to repeat. And, most of the victims were just first graders, innocent children caught in a terrifying nightmare.

"Not again, " I thought. The memories began rushing in: Littleton, Colorado; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania; and Blacksburg, Virginia.

I watched the President fall silent in the middle of his prepared remarks. At that moment, he seemed to be more of a father than a politician. His grief was much more powerful than his words.

I listened to the commentators try to make some sense of things.

Some were calling for stricter control over who can buy guns and what kind of guns can be sold. Young

children in America are far more likely to be lost to gun violence than children in other industrialized countries.

Some were focusing on identifying the alienated kids likely to do these sorts of things. It is not entirely possible to prevent random acts of violence, of course, and it's still true that more children are likely to be lost outside of school than in one.

I could feel the battle lines being drawn, but I couldn't quite get up for the fight. The positions aren't new - both sides seem to be right in much of what they affirm and wrong in much of what they deny. I was losing any sense of God's presence.

I just wanted to cry.

Yet, tears have their own way of creating Advent moments, if we let them.

Living into the pain, feeling it fully, can change our hearts.

We just have to learn how to resist the siren call of our righteous anger, our naïve certainty, and our finger pointing accusations. They make us feel better, but so often they protect us from the very change of heart we so desperately need.

We just have to learn that our capacity to grieve is a sign of strength, and not of weakness.

We have been here before.

We know now that the pain won't go away all by itself. If our tears don't wash it away, it will just go underground and come up again the next time something like this happens.

I realize that we are going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this.

We have a problem. It's about guns. But, it's not just about guns.

It's about violence. It's about the reckless way we continue to violate each other's identity and integrity.

Solving this problem will take more than stricter gun control legislation or more accurate profiling of potential killers.

It will take the patient restoration of right relationships. You know, sharing with others, not being greedy, being satisfied with our respective places in the community, refusing to put someone else down just to raise us up.

This is how God works.

It will, however, require us to find the courage to be vulnerable, to enter into our pain and stay there until we feel it fully.

It will require us to realize that these were not just children - they were our children.

So, what should we do - right now, today?

I want to take pictures of the smiling faces of each child lost in Connecticut and put them in a collage on the wall of my kitchen, so that I won't forget them.

I realize that this is not the best solution for our children.

I do have a suggestion, though. The Sandy Hook shooting victims names have been released to the public. They are available on the Internet and in several newspapers this morning.

Get the names. Print them, cut them out, or copy them down. And, put the list in your prayer book.

Each morning this week, pull out the list and pray for those we have lost. Pray for their families and friends. Pray for the change of heart that we will all need to experience to prepare the way for the new life to come.

I realize that we are going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this.

I realize that the time will come when we all need to step up and take a stand on what we think should be done.

But, first, we should just cry.

Amen.

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