

Community Memorial Service
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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The Apostle Paul once pointed out that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” And I think what we are seeing across the nation and the world today is this very truth in action. In fact, your presence here tonight is another sign that love gushes forth and ultimately conquers whenever evil and grievous sin enter the world. At times like this, we come together in prayer, and no one should underestimate the power of communities like this one banding together to send out the love that God has entrusted to us. Whatever you are feeling tonight, your presence here is a sign that the forces of healing are at work. Sadness, anger, disillusionment, ... whatever you are feeling, it is alright, because you have brought it to God. And God will use whatever you offer him.

In the weeks and months ahead, there will be much speculation and debate about the need for better security on school campuses and about the need for more effective emergency response teams. We will argue about gun laws – reducing the availability of handguns, so that a deranged person will be less likely to go on a rampage, or increasing the number of people who carry handguns, so that innocent people can more readily defend themselves. We will debate the reasons for the rise of violence in the United States, and we will analyze the psychological deterioration of the people who do the unspeakable.

This is all very natural. It's what we do. It's what we do, when we are feeling helpless and we want to fix something. Adult debates and conversation will perhaps help move us, over time, to a better place. But I want to offer two suggestions.

The first is a suggestion about the ways in which we wrestle with these problems. On an ordinary news day, I worry about having my eleven-year-old in the room when a television news program is on. Because even on a day of ordinary news, acts of barbarism and gruesome violence are being broadcast from somewhere in the world. The world is much smaller than it used to be, and news broadcasters recognize that Americans want to know instantly about the worst atrocities committed by human beings anywhere they can be found.

Likewise, newspapers are prone to carry such startling headlines and pictures that I regularly decide to remove the paper from the house before a child can see it. Stories of violence and human degradation sell papers. And what makes the television and newspaper industry all the more distressing is that commentators and editorialists often seem as concerned about denigrating people who disagree with them, as they do about making a case for their own opinion. Charitable and civilized discourse does not attract our attention as much as flamboyant personal attacks.

I am not advocating that we keep our children in a fantasy world. I only want to recognize that our eyes and ears are portholes to our souls. What we take in visually and aurally has an effect on us at the deepest level of our being. Goethe once said, “A person should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life,

in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul.” I believe there is wisdom here, and just as our attention to beauty can fortify the soul, so our exposure to violence can damage the soul.

My first suggestion then is, for the sake of our children, and for the sake of our own souls, we should limit our time in front of the television and be mindful of an unhealthy immersion in too much detail. At some point, you know enough, and it is time to turn off the television and go for a walk with your spouse or play with your children or call a friend for coffee. As we turn away from over-exposure to violence, we must turn to beauty and embrace one another in kindness. It is how God created us to live.

This is simply a way of proclaiming our faith, not only with our lips but in our lives. And we should not underestimate its power. When the disciples sternly pointed out that Jesus was a serious rabbi who was concerned about the salvation of the world, Jesus admonished them and took little children into his arms and blessed them. We need to do more of the same. In fact, maybe this is precisely how Jesus intended to save the world.

My second suggestion is much simpler. Pray. At times like this, we will naturally want to fix things. We’ll debate the causes of violence and propose solutions, but the fact is that there are some things we cannot fix on our own. We have to give them to God. Pray.

We don’t need words in order to pray. All we need to do, once in a while, is stop what we are doing, close our eyes, and offer ourselves, along with anyone else on our minds, ... offer it all in silence to God. Before you go to work, before you go shopping, before you go to a meeting, before you make a phone call, before your meal, ... it doesn’t matter when, it only matters that we offer ourselves and each other day after day to God. Because the pace of our lives and the cares of a troubled world threaten to make us all into spiritual amnesiacs. And when we are forgetful of God, we become even more forgetful of one another. As David Anderson said to me today, the most important thing for us to remember is that we are all in this together. No one is alone.

We are united tonight with people of many different faiths across the United States and around the world in our sadness for the loss of innocent lives, for the families of the deceased, and for the entire Virginia Tech community. At various times, we will all feel a range of feelings, from anger and disillusionment to distress and worry at what seems to be coming of this world. Which is all the more reason for each of us here to resolve that we will nourish our souls by tending to beauty and love, and we will return over and over to God in prayer. Because even in our weakness and confusion, God has ordained us to be instruments of God’s compassion and peace.

Whatever you are feeling tonight, it is alright. Because you have brought it to God in this gathering. And God will make good use of whatever you offer him.