

“Remembrance and Hope”

August 3, 2008, 2008

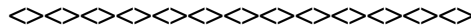
Chalice Lighting: “A Spiritual Home” (from the Canadian Unitarian Council in remembrance of the events at our sister Knoxville Church)

*As a spiritual home is a sanctuary, a safe space
for the gathering of the beloved community,
we light this chalice, symbol of our free faith,*

*In solidarity with brothers and sisters all over the world
who mourn with the Knoxville community last week's tragic events,
the violation of their sanctuary and the loss of precious lives.*

*We light this chalice in honour of the courage and goodness
of those who in every age, mindless of the cost to themselves,
are moved to shield others from acts of violence.*

*May this flame burn in our hearts today to warm us
and remind us that our greatest security lies in our choice
to answer hate with the all-consuming power of love.*



SERMON:

I begin today's homily with an apology. No, not really an apology, but an explanation of what I am going to say and how it is said. I realized this morning that my words are disjointed, that one paragraph does not necessarily lead to the next. I confess this is because I am disjointed in my mind and in my spirit. Truthfully, I just don't want to think about all this stuff and yet I know it must be confronted.

Please bear with me, and let us bear with one another.

By now we all know the outline of the story of events last Sunday morning during worship at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church. In a summertime service where the children were presenting a shortened version of the Broadway musical *Annie* after a week-long music camp, a man came into the sanctuary with a shotgun and 76 rounds of ammunition and began shooting. Two people were killed and five other seriously wounded.

The children were quickly moved out of the building and into a neighboring church, and none of them was physically injured—although we may never know the extent of their psychological and emotional trauma.

Several guys from the congregation tackled the gunman and held him down until the police arrived only minutes later. He was taken into custody where he remains under a \$1 million bond.

UU folks from around the country came to the aid of the Knoxville congregations. The Rev. Bill Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations came immediately, as did the UUA's Trauma Response team, set up after the Columbine High School shootings.

A memorial service was held on Monday evening at the Presbyterian church next door with over 1,000 attending. Candles were lit, silences were observed, and at the end, the children who were at the Sunday service requested to sing the theme song from their production of *Annie*: “The sun'll come out tomorrow...”

Remembrance services have been held around the country in UU churches, including this one here at Shoreline. Many of us feel that the violence in our sister church in Knoxville is a family matter, and that folks everywhere are profoundly affected.

A large aspect of this tragedy is that it is not all that uncommon. Over the years violent acts have been perpetrated against houses of worship again and again. Other places which we have thought to be sanctuaries—safe havens—have been attacked, including of course schools.

We remember the appalling shootings of five girls in a tiny Amish schoolhouse, less than two years ago. Since then there have been gunshots fired and people killed in Detroit, Baton Rouge, Moscow Idaho, Neosho, Missouri, and just last December two church members were shot to death and three others were injured after a gunman opened fire outside the New Life Church in Colorado Springs as Sunday services were wrapping up.

And now, our own Unitarian Universalist congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Violence is everywhere, of course, and shooting guns is an American pastime, recently honored with a Supreme Court ruling that folks in Washington DC may now carry guns everywhere. The Court said this right is enshrined in the US Constitution.

For me, an important question arises: *How many times do we have to endure the horror of another gunman picking off shoppers in a store, mowing down fellow workers at a plant or shop or people gathered for worship in a church before we realize that we are handing over these precious rights to those who claim that the right to own a gun supercedes my right to feel safe in a public place?*

Another question arises. *What is going to be my response to the Knoxville horrors? How is my life going to be different and, perhaps more significantly, how are things going to be here in our own congregation?*

Will we install metal detectors at the front doors? Will we, like the Colorado church, employ armed guards checking people as they come inside?

Jim Adkisson, the gunman last Sunday, left a four-page letter describing his plans. The horrific words included his hatred of what he called “the liberal movement”, and especially Unitarian Universalism and its liberal, political activities.

Adkisson "stated his belief that all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country," investigator Steve Still wrote. Adkisson was a loner who hates "blacks, gays and anyone different from him," a longtime acquaintance told the Knoxville News Sentinel.

The FBI is considering this to be a hate crime. So what does that mean for us? Do we pull back on our historic social justice ideas and activities? Do we now live in fear that because we take unpopular stands, we too will be targeted?

And what about those words we hear every Sunday morning: “Whoever you are and wherever you are on your life journey, you are welcome here”? Can we ever be a truly *welcoming congregation*?

The events of this Sunday raise significant questions for worshippers of all faiths. How safe is the sanctuary? What does it mean to put down your defenses and stand fully honest, authentic and exposed before your God? How does one do that when the sanctuary has been violated? Any sanctuary, which conceivably could have been our own?

How much energy do we put into defense - into assuring that our practices keep our children and our participants safe? And when does the concern for safety distract us from the higher good and values we serve? When must we do our work, open our doors, and speak our mind despite the risks?

They say that there is a maximum of six degrees of separation between persons who do not know each other. It is likely it is true. But when you begin following the relationships that flow between congregations and people of faith, six degrees appears an exaggeration.

As we consider our response to this horror, I want to return to another religious group who suffered even worse harm, the Amish of Lancaster County in Pennsylvania. Five little girls were shot to death in a little schoolhouse there.

Amazingly, the Amish folks’ response was a reversal of the typical one: they began their response and continued throughout in the spirit of forgiveness. They paid particular attention to the widow of the gunman and many gathered at his funeral service. Throughout it all, the Amish held to their core, religious beliefs. Namely, that love is the only true response to evil.

I always end my memorial services with a prayer:

“This is our Hope: Let us now resolve to honor our fallen friend by being so good in our living, so kindly, so understanding, so forgiving, so transcendent of the trivial, that in our love for those who remain and who need us and our strength in this hour, we shall partly make good our loss. And in the beauty of our lives, may it be that we erect the noblest monument to this good woman. This is the way we can now truly honor this woman.”

We light candles for the afflicted:

Killed were Greg McKendry, and Linda Kraeger

The many wounded, physically and spiritually.

Jim D. Adkisson, 58, the accused killer and his long estranged wife.

The good people at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and at Westside UU Fellowship.

Mostly, this candle is lit in remembrance and hope for the children who now must live with the images of this awful event.

May it be that all of us defy violence with the magnificence of love and true regard.

Amen.



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