

Message: Facing Tragedy Together**Where were you?**

That’s the question people ask one another after a major crisis occurs. Where were you on Wednesday, Dec. 2nd at 10:59 a.m. when Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik attacked a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center social service agency, killing 14 people and injuring 21 others? Where were you on Dec. 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked? Where were you on the morning of September 11, 2001 when terrorists hijacked three aircraft, attacking New York City and targets in Washington, D.C.? Where were you when terrorists attacked Paris on November 14, 2015 killing more than 120 people?

We don’t ask because we really want to know the specifics of what others were doing. We ask because we want to know that other people share our uncertainty, doubt and fear. Tragedies like the incident in San Bernardino shock and startle us. We’re wakened from our complacent, passive acceptance of life and confronted with a truth we find disturbing.

When will the violence end? Sadly, not in our lifetime! We only have to consider the rawness of our memories: Pearl Harbor, 74 years ago; 9/11, 14 years ago. Other raw memories include the 1995 bombing of the A. P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. We sadly remember the bombing at the Boston marathon, the shooting in Aurora, CO and the attack in Roseburg, OR. We are filled with sorrow about the recent attack in Colorado Springs, CO, which shows that those misguided may profess Christian faith, even if they don’t really have it.

We can’t forget or ignore attacks on people living in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, France, England, Libya, the Philippines, Mali, the Ukraine, and the list goes on and on. The world is a violent place and it always has been. As evidence, we only have to read Genesis 6:11-12, “*When God looked at the earth, he saw that people had ruined it. Violence was everywhere, and it had ruined their life on earth*” (ERV).

According to some sources, the San Bernardino attack is the 355th incident in the U.S. involving more than four people in the last twenty years. Workplace violence is a well-known phrase and churches are

beginning to roll out “active shooter” training. There have been attacks on schools, military bases, theaters, shopping centers, even on highways.

Why did it happen? I don’t know. No one does. We don’t know why a quiet, polite and private couple would all of a sudden snap and commit such a heinous act. And we’ll probably never know, leaving us with the question “why?” That disturbs us. But our discomfort goes deeper. That’s because there’s another question: “why not?” Why were some killed while others went unharmed? Why was the attack on that building and not at another location, perhaps where you or I work or where our children or grandchildren go to school? The question bothers us. We don’t know why things happen in life. We’re afraid to admit that we don’t deserve life and health. Why are we alive and our family, friends or acquaintances dead or injured?

The answer most often given in Christian circles: “It’s God’s will.”

I want to caution you about offering that explanation. It makes a great presumption: we know God’s will. We aren’t God. We aren’t divine. We don’t know God’s will. We do know God is a loving and merciful God. If that wasn’t true, Jesus wouldn’t have come to earth to save us and we wouldn’t be gathered today, reflecting on the meaning of Advent and the first and second coming of Christ.

The day after the incident, after a restless night when God’s Spirit was working on my heart, I read these words from Psalm 46:1-2a: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear....*” And in Romans 8:28 Paul writes, “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*” That doesn’t sound like a God who is distant and uncaring, moving us around a global chess board, sacrificing a pawn here or there to win some sort of cosmic game between good and evil. It sounds like a God who loves and cares for us, a God whose heart breaks when we do violence to one another.

As United Methodists, we believe God gives us free will. We have the capability to choose to do good or evil. God gives us the freedom to make our own decisions about our life. That includes the decision on whether to believe in God or not! God sent us a Messiah to save us from the control of sin and death. As followers of Christ, we’re no longer

bound and chained by evil. Jesus came to set us free, giving the gift of the Holy Spirit so we can overcome the compulsion to sin. That’s good news.

One reason we have to be careful of claiming “God’s will” in a crisis is that it implies God is with some people and not with others. Jesus gave us a very different message in his sermon on the mount when he said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”* (Matthew 5:43-45).

God’s grace is not withheld from some and given to others. God is with everyone. God is with those who are unharmed. God is with those who were injured. God is with those who were killed. I believe God’s Spirit came to each of the fourteen people who died in their time of need. That’s because we believe in a God whose kingdom is not limited or bounded by death. And I believe God’s Spirit is with the families of the victims today, those who are recovering from their injuries and, yes, God’s Spirit is with the family of the couple.

What’s the danger? We want to take action, but must be careful not to cause more harm. Ethnic profiling and government mandated lists don’t make sense. They’re unjust, just like the Japanese internment camps set up in the U.S during World War II. I’m also reminded of what Joseph had to deal with when he took a very pregnant Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem because the Roman overlords required a census to be taken (Luke 2:1-5). Oppressing and marginalizing others under the guise of protection isn’t a just act.

It’s easy to point a finger at Muslims and other non-believers, but dehumanizing others isn’t right. Malik’s sister and brother-in-law tell us the family doesn’t know why the couple did what they did. By their accounts, the couple loved their baby and must have known their death would orphan their 6 month old child, so why do the act? The family continues to express their sorrow to the families of the victims and are clearly in sorrow, too. Penalizing them for their faith isn’t just.

We need to remember we’re not God. Jesus teaches patience and forgiveness in Matthew 7:2, *“If you judge others, you will be judged the same way you judge them. God will treat you the same way you treat others”* (NRSV). If we can find forgiveness in our hearts, showing love toward those who seek to harm us, what will we receive in return? There are unofficial reports that Dylan Roof, the attacker in Charleston, S.C., who was forgiven by the families of the victims, cries every night in prison. We can hope he finds salvation, for no one is unredeemable. This is the hope we all have.

What are we to do? I invite you to remember Jesus’ words in Luke 10:17-31. When we face crises, don’t despair. Pray unceasingly together for effective action emerges from prayer. Simple acts of hope in the face of overwhelming adversity send a powerful message to others: we believe in the future and we’re determined to make it a healthy one. We face the future with assurance because of Jesus’ promise: *“Remember, I will be with you always”* (Matthew 28:20a). We overcome our uncertainty, doubt, fear and anger when God is with us.

One thing we should do is acknowledge loss without diminishing it. Making excuses, blaming others and pointing fingers doesn’t help. It takes away from the loss of others, putting our agendas and views ahead of those who are hurting and in need. Putting on a false smile or cheerfulness when we are sad or depressed inside isn’t the way, either. It just gives others a false impression and delays real healing. The shortest verse in the New Testament is the most powerful: *“Jesus wept”* (John 11:35). He wept for Mary and Martha and the death of Lazarus. And then he took action, giving the glory to God. Jesus’ action wasn’t about rules and regulations, e.g the “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not”. It was about how Jesus helps us to come to terms with grief. It’s the story of God’s powerful love for us and the love we have for God in return.

How does grief help? It’s important for us to acknowledge our uncertainty, doubt and even our anger when we’re faced with a loss. Our emotions are real and we need to embrace them in a healthy way. We must be on guard against unhealthy attitudes and acts that lead us away from God. Peter, by faith at Jesus’ command, stepped out of a boat and walked on water, safe and secure. But when Peter took his

eyes off Jesus and looked at the chaos of the storm that surrounded him, he began to sink and cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14:30). The same is true for us. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, he will guide us through these difficult times, the trials we face and be with us when we cry out to him. Jesus will give us the courage and strength we need to ask hard questions and to face our doubts, fear and anger. God’s grace is strongest when we are at our weakest.

What does it mean to us during Advent? Our Scripture, Luke 3:1-6, offers us hope. John the Baptist was the voice in the wilderness calling out “*prepare the way of the Lord*” (v4). John brought a word of hope to a people struggling on their own in a violent world. His message: turn back to God, be baptized, and look for the salvation of God. When we do, the things that are hard, challenging and difficult will be removed. Nothing will stand between us and salvation of God, faith in Jesus. Jesus shows us a new way. Are we showing that way to others?

Jesus came to earth out of love, establishing a new covenant between humanity and God; one that restores us. He gave us a radically new way to live, based on love and mercy, not rules and penalties. Jesus will come again as king and ruler to restore and heal all of creation. All rulers, nations and people will come into his kingdom and stand before the throne of God. Everything will be revealed. Every head will bow and we will all raise our voices, praising his name. On that day, there will be no more sorrow, no more tears and the sins of this world will be banished forever. This is God’s promise and it will be fulfilled. That’s a promise we can share.

How are we to respond? We’re called to pray and act together. That’s in our Christian DNA. 1 Corinthians 12:7 says, “*Each person is given something to do that shows who God is*” (The Message). According to Philip Yancy, “Our inheritance is grace-based and equal. But our assignments are tailor made. No two snowflakes are the same and no two fingerprints are the same. Why would two people or their skills be the same? No wonder Paul tell us to make sure we know what the

Master wants! Let’s look carefully at ourselves and the work we have been given, and then dive wholeheartedly into that.”¹

For some of us, that may mean getting involved as advocates for gun control. For others, it may mean getting involved in ministries to help victims of violent crime. Still others may be interested in working to battle poverty, seeking to help people live better, more sustainable lives to help prevent tragedies. God calls each of us. It’s our turn.

How will you respond when people ask “where were you”?

Let us pray...

¹ *Daily Devotion by Max Lucado for Dec. 4, 2015, source: www.maxlucado.com/*

Holy Communion

“The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:24).

Dale and Juanita Ryan are authors of a book title “Rooted in God’s Love” (2008). They write: “We are people with painful memories. We remember our losses. We remember our sins. We remember the sins which have been committed against us. It is part of the hard work of recovery to face these memories, to grieve them and to come to terms with them. But sometimes the painful memories become so powerful that it seems like nothing will be able to compete with them for our attention. The memory of pain consumes us. In times like this we need a powerful new memory that can challenge the dominance of our painful memories.

Jesus invites us to receive a new and startling memory. ‘Remember me,’ Jesus says, ‘Eat the bread and drink the cup and remember that I gave my life for you. I gave my life because I love you. Take this new memory. Allow it to shape the way you think about yourself and about life and about me. Allow yourself to remember me.’

It’s not that the memory of Jesus’ sacrificial love erases all of our painful memories. Painful memories still have to be faced and grieved if healing is to come. But God offers us in Jesus a memory powerful enough to compete with the most powerful of painful memories. The death-grip which painful memories have on our attention can be broken by the powerful memory of God’s love.”²

I invite you to spend a few moments in silence, reflecting on the painful memories of this week and of our lives. Embrace the memory of Jesus’ love and allow the healing process to begin.

Lord, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

² *Daily Devotion by Dale & Juanita Ryan for Dec. 4, 2015, source: www.nacronline.com/*

Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”