

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixteenth Sunday of Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Sermon about Apalachee High School Shooting

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-10, [11-13] 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

09/08/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

24[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. ³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to

heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”
 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he
 spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he
 ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were
 astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even
 makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Apalachee High School Shooting

I had a much different sermon planned for today. Last week I started what I had hoped would be a 5-part sermon series on the Second Testament letter of James. I’ve spent the last two weeks digging into commentaries and scholarly articles on it, thinking through where we would go. But then Wednesday happened. As I sat waiting for an appointment the headline came across my phone: “Casualties reported in shooting at Georgia high school, suspect in custody.”¹ As the afternoon carried on the full extent of the shooting became clear. Four dead, two students and two teachers, as well as nine other injuries to innocent victims.² The lives of the community around Apalachee High School in Georgia will forever be changed. And they are not alone. In just 2024 this country has seen 385 mass shootings.³ A survivor of the 2017 shooting in Las Vegas who was shot now shuts down whenever he hears anything that sounds like a gunshot.⁴ It’s a trauma that

¹https://apple.news/Ab1y_wZ4jQVeMQ-q88iiPZQ

²<https://www.npr.org/2024/09/04/nx-s1-5100648/apalachee-high-school-georgia-shooting>

³<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

⁴ <https://time.com/5476998/risk-of-guns-america/>

lives with you, if you're one of the lucky ones. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, guns are the leading cause of death among American children and teens.⁵ A friend of mine sends their child to school with a smart watch because they want to make sure they have the ability to make an emergency phone call.

Are you familiar with the five stages of grief? They were introduced by a psychiatrist to help categorize our response. They are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Every time a shooting like this happens I go through the first four. You could probably categorize my individual sermons into these responses. But the one stage I refuse to adopt is the last one, acceptance. It would certainly be easy to preach something different, I could stick my head in the sand and ignore the events in Georgia this week, but to do so would be to dishonor the lives of those who died. The first time I “accept” these sorts of violent events, the first time I fail to address it, I send the message that this is in some way a “normal” thing. And believe you me, it's anything but. My friend, Pastor Andrew Tucker made that point in my first year of ministry, silence on my part only helps to communicate the message that this is a reality with which we should come to terms.

So what do we do? How do we choose to react? I think that the beginning of any faithful response must come to terms with the variety of emotions that are running through us, and of those, fear is certainly a major one. I have a book that is a collection of sermons from just after the September 11th attack, which marks its anniversary in just three days time, and in one sermon a pastor from Washington National Cathedral writes that “*the purpose in dastardly, evil acts, such as war against innocent*

⁵ <https://efsgv.org/wp-content/uploads/2019CDCdata.pdf>

civilians, is to impose fear— fear that disrupts our spiritual capacity to go on with life...” and boy does that feel true.

Another key is honesty. We need to create places where we can responsibly say what we are feeling. As I scrolled through social media this week I saw several posts asking where God was in all of this. How could God let something like this happen? If we want to have a genuine faith, these are questions we need to ask, they’re questions we need to wrestle with alone and in community together.

We can ask those questions because our God is strong enough to handle them. Scripture is full of times where people have yelled out and screamed at God. God doesn’t get mad and smite us. God understands that we’re trying to wrestle with big and painful things. Scripture tells us that death and evil will not win. As the Gospel of John says: “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*”⁶ The church, this congregation, this community, they become a place where we can come and see that truth, where we can cry, yell, and scream. It becomes a place where we can say no to this violence, a place where we can help one another, build one another up. It can become a holy place, rich with God’s saving activity. So we boldly come here, time after time, to celebrate that hope. Amen.

⁶ John 1:5 NRSV