

“To Wash Off the Not Human”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
and the Aftermath of the Mass Shootings in Orlando
Father’s Day, Sunday, June 19th, 2016
Text: Luke 8:26-39

Oh come, Thou refreshment of them that languish and faint. Come, Thou Star and Guide of them that sail in the tempestuous sea of the world; Thou only Haven of the tossed and shipwrecked. Come, Thou Glory and Crown of the living, and only Safeguard of the dying. Come, Holy Spirit, in much mercy, and make [us] fit to receive Thee. —St. Augustine

Some are calling it an act of terror, homegrown or otherwise, the worst attack on American soil since 9/11. Others see it primarily as an horrific hate crime committed against the most targeted community of hate crimes, people more targeted for brutality even than Jewish and Muslim populations. Everyone agrees that this was the worst mass shooting in U.S. history.

The causes themselves, I suppose, are *legion*, such that there likely will be no complete agreement on the tremors that have violently convulsed the nation, resulting in yet another rage-filled, atrocious outburst upon the beloved creatures made in “the image and likeness” of God. Some have called the causes “influences and apparatuses,” but in light of the Gospel Reading which we have just received, I call them “Legion.” Tragically, Legion is ours.

Once again today, my brothers and sisters, as we have had to do on so many occasions since we began our journey together at the turn of this century, we must grieve a massive crime, a public heartbreak, a societal horror. Sometimes, there seems to be nothing for us—no consolation, no reasons, no comprehension, nothing but sobbing lament, nothing but Rachel’s unrelenting ache to the very core, “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’”

Our young brothers and sisters, people who had already suffered far more than their share of shame and humiliation in life, these lambs of the loving, Good Shepherd, are no more for this life, even as they sought sanctuary together in what they trusted was a safe harbor. Surely, we must ask, how are we to live when so utterly aghast in the face of this unimaginable and unmitigated violence? How are we to confront these massive explosions of evil unrestrained?

Last November when gunmen and suicide bombers hit a concert hall, a stadium, restaurants and bars in Paris, leaving 130 people dead and hundreds wounded, leaders assured people that they were ordering military strikes; that they were ensuring security; that they would defeat the Islamic State. A commentator responded, “Though these world leaders are saying what they ought to say, it’s all rather sad.” He concluded, “I don’t believe any president or any army can defeat such madness. How do you defend yourself against a foe who is willing, even eager, to die in order to kill you? How can we defend ourselves against those who are so enthralled with death?” Then he said, “We may not be able to kill our way out of this [one].”

How do we defend ourselves and others against Legion?

Make no mistake, this is no horror flick, although Hollywood has contributed shamelessly and unabatedly to the design of this culture of violence. This is a real-life horror that repeats itself daily, albeit not nearly so massive as Orlando or Newtown, on the streets and in the neighborhoods of every major city in the country. You may know that the number of people shot by gunfire in Chicago by mid-April of this year had already surpassed the grim milestone of 1,000, a pace not seen since the 1990s. Around 33,000 people die each year in gun-related deaths in the U.S., most in smaller-number

homicides, a horror to which we have grown numb. Many others are suicides or unintentional and accidental, often involving children.

It may be an understatement to say that gun violence is a major public health crisis. Yet, if it were a disease, there would be millions of dollars committed to research, prevention, and the hope for a cure. However, gun violence is not perceived as a disease. If our reason-bound frame of mind will allow for it, even for this moment, I dare say that gun violence is demonic. In our age, by and large, we cannot conceive of the demonic. We believe in all sorts of illnesses in body and mind, but we do not believe in demon possession. Yet this so-called rational, materialist, non-demonic or spirit-inhabited worldview is utterly *inconceivable* to our Christian sisters and brothers in African and Asian nations!

What we have experienced again this week is, as so many have said, “unspeakable.” There is no reason, nor are there words, for this terrifying, destructive reality of the dark powers and dominions, cloaking themselves again beneath the guise of religion, as evil most cleverly does. It seems not to matter which religion, evil can feed like a hidden cancer on any religion until it has bloated itself with sufficient power to metastasize and destroy.

“Though hordes of devils fill the land / All threat’ning to devour us,” Martin Luther wrote in that triumphant Reformation hymn, “We tremble not, unmoved we stand; They cannot overpow’r us.” Might Luther not have been referring to the “hordes of devils” which he perceived so clearly lurking beneath the religious garb of the medieval church with its power to dominate shame-filled, guilt-ridden, terrified souls?

Politicians, columnists and academics refer to this phenomenon as “extremism.” The label is not sufficient. Rather, this is evil in its most hideous and abhorrent form—evil perpetrated against the unsuspecting and the defenseless. And to see someone you love sinking into this helpless abyss of revenge, domination and hatred—sinking despite everything you have tried to do to help, this has to be among the most gut-wrenching of all human experiences.

As a father, I pitied Seddique Mateen having to account to the world for his own son who had committed this massive crime. What agony. As a pastor, I sympathized with the imam of that congregation in Fort Pierce who now has to face the realization that he may have failed one of his flock.

His name was Omar Mateen. By now, you know him by many other names—terrorist, hater, monster, abuser, homophobic. His name is now racist, violent, misogynist, yet another “lone wolf” spawned in a society of Internet lopers and loners. But I think his name was something else. I think his name was “Legion,” a person upon whom the demonic powers had cascaded in such multitudes so as to raise the very flood gates of hell, through which the crimson tide of Abel flows again, returning to the dust from whence it now cries out to God.

Yes, I think his name was Legion.

Try as we might—with all our might—to restrain Legion, to sentence him to a life among the dead, this Legion has again wrenched his shackles and chains to go on a howling rampage from the tombs into the wilds of the night, armed with the artillery of modern warfare designed solely for the rapid killing of human beings. And it seems that the best a human can do with Legion is to disarm him, lock him in prison, constrain him to live the rest of his days among the tombs where he can bring no harm to the living.

Now, to this graveyard, the risen Lord Jesus *draws near* to Legion, here in this place of the dead, from which all others have fled for the safety of their lives. Jesus is now on the *far side* of the Galilean Sea, a far and foreign country, well outside the boundaries of Israel, even far beyond the boundaries of the living. Here, Jesus meets a man who would hardly qualify as a human being. “...For a long time, he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.”

His name was “Legion,” for it seems that there was a Roman legion of some six thousand soldiers at war within him, a living hell roaring in a single human being, another “lone wolf” whose lonely life is

out of anyone's control.

When all others have run away in hiding, the Lord Jesus *draws near* to this legion of demonic powers, commanding them to enter a herd of pigs—yes, pity the poor pigs, but how appropriate for a Jewish story! The pigs careen headlong into the abyss below, an abyss which we have known since the creation story, since the story of Noah and the flood, which is the dark, watery abode—the *Sheol*—for chaos, disorder and the dead.

This wild episode ends with Legion “baptized”! Cleansed of the powers and the dominions that have ruled his life, now drowned in the watery abyss, this man is “clothed and in his right mind,” at peace at last, and seated at the feet of Jesus—just like the “woman from the city” in the story last Sunday; yes, a disciple of the Lord.

“To bathe in the Waters of Life,” wrote the poet William Blake, “To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human.”

Here is the power of the resurrected Lord Jesus who has “all authority in heaven and on earth” to defeat our worst fears and our ultimate adversaries who dwell within us. It is power unleashed in compassion for the vulnerable, the confused, the possessed, and the lost.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas of Duke has said that “Israel is a name for people who had to learn to live their lives out of control... Israel knew what it [meant] to have their ultimate destiny in the hands of God.” Only God could lead Israel. Only God can lead us. Only God could allow Israel to survive into the future against gentile hate and cruelty.

There are times like these when we know in our heart of hearts that our lives are out of our control. Christians are those who are called to live in a world out of control and in relationship to the God who is commanding us, guiding us, leading us to *draw near* to people we do not want to love and into situations we do not want to face.

Foreign terrorists are specifically targeting the vulnerable, the hopeless, the young, the angry, the vengeful, and especially the humiliated among Muslim populations, targeting them for indoctrination and radicalization, training them for a cowards' war upon innocent, defenseless victims of whom the majority are Muslim, appealing to the outrage that comes with victimization and the raw human impulse for dominance and revenge.

Is it not our Lord's loving command and most honorable call that we, too, *draw near* to that “far country” by the power of the Holy Spirit of the Almighty God and his Son Jesus—to move near and to claim for Him those injured, vulnerable, humiliated lives, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Is it not also for us to *draw near* to our neighbors of good will and kind hearts who are from many, diverse walks of life—all children of the heavenly Father—to listen and to speak together, to learn from and to teach one another, to serve and to pray and to sing together, to reach out as children of the Great Spirit to rescue Legion, that he may never, ever take another human life? Yes, this has been the missionary call to faithful, courageous souls who have *drawn near* to that which we have feared the most, confident that we do so at Jesus' side.

For the sake of the suffering Christ and his beloved children in Orlando, yes, for the sake of his beloved ones throughout the world, let us be bold to take up our missionary call, never for the sake of powers and dominions, never for the sake of oppression and worldly gain, but for the sake of the lost and the forsaken.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”