

Sermon (not based on propers for the day)
Sunday after the Las Vegas Shooting of October 1, 2017

October 8, 2017

Last Monday, most Americans awoke to news from Las Vegas that is nothing less than horrific. For so many in Las Vegas, Sunday night must have seemed like the night that would never end.

In the face of such overwhelming news, we naturally seek after facts. We want to know what happened, and when. We want to know who did it. By any yardstick the facts were staggering. Fifty-nine people are dead and 527 more wounded after a lone gunman opened fire on a music festival from a perch in a hotel room 32 floors above. The attack was deadly, diabolical, and premeditated.

The shooting is already described as the worst in American history. The gunman, believed to be Stephen Paddock, killed himself as police prepared to storm his hotel room, from which he had aimed his deadly gunfire. The facts emerged slowly, and, even now, a week later, are still emerging.

Paddock had no notable criminal record. He was not known to have suffered mental illness. Indeed, he had held highly responsible positions before his retirement, nothing that any gun law would have screened out as being unacceptable. Granted, no one seemed to have a clue he owned so *many*, or the horrific nature of his stash of firearms and explosives. But from all accounts, no one seems to have considered him a threat. His brother, contacted after the massacre, said that the family was beyond shock, as if “crushed by an asteroid.”

In Las Vegas and beyond, hundreds of families are crushed by grief and concern. Nearly 60 human beings, very much alive just hours before the shooting, are now dead, seemingly murdered by random order.

The facts will continue to come as investigations continue. We need facts in order to steady our minds and grapple with understanding. We must have facts, and yet we can be easily overwhelmed by them. Some “facts” will not be facts at all. National Public Radio helpfully and honestly ended its news coverage of the massacre Monday morning with these words:

“This is a developing story. Some things that get reported by the media will later turn out to be wrong. We will focus on reports from police officials and other authorities. We will update as the situation develops.”

I count that as both helpful and honest.

But the facts of who and what and where and how, still unfolding, point to the even more difficult question – *why?*

Why would anyone kill a fellow human being? Why launch an ambush massacre upon concertgoers listening to country music? Why premeditate a mass killing?

Was he driven by some obsession, fueled by some grievance? Was he sending a signal or political message as an act of terrorism? Is the answer psychiatric or pharmacological?

Our minds crave an answer.

Why do we ask why?

We cannot help but ask *why* because, made in God’s image, we are moral creatures who cannot grasp or understand the world around us without moral categories. We are moral creatures inhabiting a moral universe and our moral sense of meaning is the faculty most perplexed when overwhelmed by horror and grief.

The terror group known as ISIS, as it so often does, claimed “credit” for the attack. Law enforcement authorities, however, said there is no evidence of anything related to ISIS.

Clark County Sheriff Joe Lombardo told reporters that he was not sure if the massacre was sending a message of *any* kind:

“We have to establish what his motivation is first. And there’s motivating factors associated with terrorism other than a distraught person just intending to cause mass casualties.”

So far as we now know, Paddock left no note and communicated no clear message. The gunfire tells some story, as does the meticulous planning that now seems to have gone into the attack, but we do not yet know what the story is. We may never know.

That troubles us, and so it should. Knowing the story and determining the motivation would add rationality to our understanding, but we will never really understand. What we

do know is this is far from the first attack to horrify this nation, and, even if we had the most perfect gun laws in the world, it is far from the last.

A massacre by a lone gunman killed 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007. Another killed 27, mostly children, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. Yet another killed 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016.

In a statement released earlier this week, a group of Episcopal bishops had this to say:

“It has become clichéd at moments such as these to offer thoughts and prayers. But as Christians, we must reflect upon the mass killings that unfold with such regularity in our country. And we must pray: for the victims, for their loved ones, for all who attended to the victims in the immediacy of the shooting, for the first responders who do so much to mitigate the awful effects of these shootings, and for the medical personnel who will labor for many days to save the wounded. We must also enter into the sorrow of those who are most deeply affected by our country’s crippling frequent outbursts of lethal gun violence. We must look into our own hearts and examine the ways in which we are culpable or complicit in the gun violence that surrounds us every day. And then, having looked, we must act. As Christians, we are called to engage in the debates that shape how Americans live and die, especially when they die due to violence or neglect.”

These conversations, these debates, are, of course, vitally important. But they do not get at the heart of what the faith community is ultimately called to do. Our call is to examine gun – and other – violence as a *theological* matter, not just a matter of legislation or political action.

Let’s face it, we really do not fully understand *any* of these attacks, nor countless other outbreaks of evil around the world. And so our call is to place this entire debate in the realm Jesus placed it – in the realm of naming it for what it is and dealing with it honestly on that basis.

Curiously, it was President Trump, not usually the most articulate in his comments, who actually got to the heart of the matter when, in his remarks early this week, he waded into deep theological waters, calling the massacre “an act of pure evil.” I am

rarely moved by his rhetoric, but this time his words “nailed it” in ways I would never have expected. He said this:

“In times such as these I know we are searching for some kind of meaning in the chaos, some kind of light in the darkness. The answers do not come easy. But we can take solace knowing that even the darkest space can be brightened by a single light, and even the most terrible despair can be illuminated by a single ray of hope.”

My friends, you and I, as followers of Christ, are called to be illuminators – to be ones by which God sheds that ray of hope. Yes, evil is a fact. And, yes, evil is a *theological* category.

But as accidentally articulate as the President might have been this week, the secular worldview cannot use the word with coherence or sense. The acknowledgement of evil requires the affirmation of a moral judgment and a moral reality above human judgment. If we are just accidental beings in an accidental universe, nothing can really be evil. Evil points to a necessary moral judgment made by a moral authority greater than we are – a transcendent and supernatural moral authority whom we name as God.

To quote one last statement, this one from Daniel Gutierrez, the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania,

“As a people of God, we will offer our daily prayers. But we must be prophets of peace. So long as people look to solve their disagreements with violence this needs to be our single greatest priority. The violence that rained down upon the crowd in Las Vegas reflects the worst of the sin and brokenness of our human condition. I am asking that we ...re-commit ourselves to the work of diffusing violence in our hearts, in our community, our nation and indeed throughout our world, including the role that guns play in this problem. Only then can we truly live into our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. I ask that we become voices of reconciliation in a hurting world. We seek to be the face of Christ to the world.... We will find a way to shine a light in the darkness in the name of Christ. We have no other choice.”

Amen, Bishop Gutierrez. Amen.