

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden; August 18, 2019*

Sweet Jesus! What is going on? Didn't we just share the peace of Christ? Isn't he the *Prince of Peace*, as we sing in the Messiah at Christmas time? What has gotten into Jesus when he says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided (Luke 12:51)!" This division will go into the heart of family life as son will be divided against father, daughter against mother. The same will be true for in-laws – it's free for all, equal opportunity division close to the bone. People will be divided over what Jesus teaches and preaches as well as his very identity. This description of division may actually be painfully raw for some of us as family and friends come for visits in the summer. Have we not all heard either ourselves or someone we know talk about how they cannot talk to loved ones about certain things that matter to them? This may be about old wounds inflicted upon each other ignorantly or knowingly. These days, we are especially facing chasms around the social, political, and – in a related manner - the spiritual climate in this country and in the world. Who needs more talk about division, especially out of Jesus' mouth?

For his part, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will experience his "baptism of fire," most likely a reference to his impending death on the cross. Jesus has been upsetting the socio-religious and political apple carts by preaching liberty and justice to the poor, loving people on the margins, and proclaiming equal access to God. Jesus has also blown open the definition of family beyond nuclear and tribal family bonds. As Richard F. Carlson puts it, "Jesus has not come to validate the human institutions and their values but to initiate God's radical will."<sup>1</sup> In the context of the urgency of Jesus' own mission and witness, he is asking us to discern the struggles of the time and respond to them with faith beyond being nice and getting along.<sup>2</sup> This also means walking the spiritual tightrope of taking a stance while not cutting off connection

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<sup>1</sup> Richard F. Carlson in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Westminster John Knox: Louisville) 2010, 359.

<sup>2</sup> We are to move "beyond the saccharine to wrestle with a God of substance and power." Patricia J. Lull in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Westminster John Knox: Louisville) 2010, 358.

with those you disagree with or reducing another complex person to one issue or opinion. We do belong to each other and are all in need of Christ's mercy and love!

Still, Jesus does not mince words: "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time (Luke 12:56)?" Language dictionary definitions of hypocrisy usually imply some level of pretense. I think there is more to it than that. "Hypo" always implies something that is functioning under the norm. Think of hypo-thyroidism as an example. The thyroid under-functions which leads to great stresses on the hormonal system of the body. *Krinein* ("to sift or decide") stems from the root *krei\** "to decipher, discern."<sup>3</sup> Hypocrisy has something to do with under-functioning in our capacity to discern. The energy of the word can imply some agency or awareness around this lack of adequate discernment. Or at least there is the sense that we could know better but don't integrate what we know. So Jesus asks, "Why do you not know?" and amazingly still embraces us in our individual and communal destructiveness.

When Jesus challenges us to interpret the present times, he is doing prophetic work. Prophets, as Brueggemann suggests (see bulletin quote) evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer suggests further that following Christ means taking our faith into our day-to-day lives and interactions.<sup>5</sup> It means viewing the suffering of the world, including our own suffering

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.etymonline.com/word/hypocrisy>.

<sup>4</sup> We hear a similar level of frustration in the passage from Isaiah. It begins as a kind of love song and only gradually reveals the level of disappointment and pain on no less than the part of the living God. God has poured so much into providing people with what they need to flourish and bear faithful fruit. The text is full of active verbs describing the care the vintner has taken in preparing the vineyard and soil from clearing the stones to planting choice vines. Yet, the people have gone off after their own will and yielded wild grapes. They will now, for a time, be left to live with the fruits of their own harvest without further protections from the one who planted them. The judgment is hard and gets harder in the verses that ensue. As is generally true for the prophets, Isaiah eventually moves from harshness to God's mercy and grace that will restore the people but not until they have tasted some of their own medicine. As Richard Rohr teaches, prophets may begin with retributive, punitive judgment but eventually come around to restorative justice that builds people up who have faltered.

<sup>5</sup> Following Christ is a matter of engagement in this world, "*living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking*

not in a privatized manner but through the lens of Christ who suffers in solidarity with everyone else on the cross of Golgatha. We are all tasked with interpreting the suffering in our present time. We may have some disagreements over what is going on and why it is happening. However, I hear Jesus saying that we must not shirk conversation or refuse to name what we perceive to be in direct opposition to the will of God as revealed in Jesus. Otherwise, we settle for “a peace that is no peace,” to quote the prophet Jeremiah (8:11).<sup>6</sup> Jesus asks more of us, lest we be hypo-critical!

There is far more going on than can be addressed in this sermon. Today, I would like to briefly address gun violence, including the mass shootings that continue to plague us as a nation. While I was in NM, we all heard news of a mass shooting in Dayton, OH, and in El Paso. The very next day, a headline declared that by August 5<sup>th</sup>, the 215<sup>th</sup> day of 2019, we had had 255 mass shootings, which made for more mass shootings than actual days of the year (defining a mass shooting as an incident with at least 4 people killed).<sup>7</sup> In the eight days prior to August 5<sup>th</sup>, more than 100 people had been shot. This number does not even include the individual deaths caused with fire arms every day. What ensued right after Dayton and El Paso was the usual public outrage and brief moments of considering tougher gun laws, including a red flag law which would allow for the seizure of a weapon from someone proving to be a danger to the public and themselves.

We must not forget that the El Paso shooter said that his killing spree was directly targeted at people of Latino/Mexican background. He was discerning the present time, convinced that he was protecting his country from a supposed invasion. As Richard Rohr likes to say, evil tends to function under the disguise of the perceived good. The word invasion has peppered the commentaries in certain news media like snow on the streets of Maine. When someone shouted that we should kill the invaders at a Trump Rally, there was no clear and immediate

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*seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world-watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think is faith, that is metanoia [change of mind/consciousness].”* Quoted in Richard Rohr’s *Daily Reflections*.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Schlafer in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3 (Westminster John Knox: Louisville) 2010, 363.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mass-shootings-2019-more-mass-shootings-than-days-so-far-this-year/>

reprimand given but time to cheer was ample. The president's visit to El Paso then included photo opportunity moments with the First Lady holding a baby whose parents perished trying to protect their son. The president gave a thumbs up in that photo. By Friday this week, any substantive and constructive talk about addressing the spiral of deaths through gun violence was taken back by the administration. Instead, we are being fed the same old scapegoating lines that place all blame on supposedly "crazy" people. While mental health can play a role in violent crimes, it is not the only source or reason as to why people die from gun violence.

Rather than connecting with the depth of grief of those who lost love ones and going deeper in discernment about how our words can potentially affect opinion and action, the conversation returned to hypo-criticism, a blatant lack of critical discernment. That is hypocrisy. Our Christian brother Donald Trump is not the only one to blame by any means but it seems to me that he contributed through his rhetoric to fueling the wrong kind of fire. The El Paso shooter reigned down destructive, retributive fire on people based on the color of their skin and ethnic heritage. The shooter felt justified in doing so and we must not be silent. Please know that I am not saying that all gun owners have this attitude. Most certainly not!<sup>8</sup>

I want to emphasize that it is important that we allow our hearts to keep breaking when we see real people mourning the death of loved ones. People and communities do come out in support of each other. [If you feel so moved, you can write cards of support to the mostly Latino elementary school students in El Paso after the service]. People are crying on each other's shoulders, sharing their grief at public memorial services and make-shift shrines. We cannot settle for letting people become one more statistic. Some of those whose lives have been changed in the past through gun violence have also sought creative ways to engage their grief and channel their energy into constructive action. One such group is called "Lead to Life," led by Bronte Velez and Kyle Lempe. They collect old guns, melt the metal and turn it into handles for gardening shovels. They use the word "serotiny" to describe what they are doing. "Serotiny" is

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<sup>8</sup> I understand that this is a country and a state that values the second amendment. There was a historical context for it. I can also appreciate the long heritage of hunting which is actually closer to the bone of facing the taking of a life than most of us will ever face who just grab the meat package out of the cooler at the local grocery store.

the process whereby seeds sprout when they are touched by fire. Now it is not gun fire but the fire in which a weapon melts and produces the handle that can become part of planting symbols of growth and transformation rather than burying yet another loved one.

The wooden shafts for the shovels are inscribed with the saying: “As we decompose violence may the earth again be free” and are used to plant trees and other plants. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of KLK’s assassination, “Lead to Life” members engaged in an act of solidarity with family members of people killed through gun violence by planting fruit trees with the help of those shovels. One of the mothers who lost her son X’avier spoke at such a transformative event and even mixed in her son’s ashes into the soil around the planted trees. She drew courage and hope from the fact that his ashes would be nutrients for new life to grow so that a different kind of fruit could grow – not just the physical fruits but fruits of hope and belonging and dignity.

This is a new consciousness of engaging violence and focusing on building community and respecting the dignity of each life. These mothers who mourn exhibit a deeper freedom than any conventional gun can produce or protect. The freedom for which Christ has sought to set us free (Galatians 5:1) is a freedom for the flourishing of the whole and not a reactive vigilante style of freedom to preserve our personal or tribal based self-interest as was on display in El Paso. Jesus speaks of a transformative fire that burns away that which keeps us from living out the love of God which is the source of the fire of life in our world. He spoke out for the well-being of the whole and I believe his words inspire us today to also speak out for the preservation of the dignity of every human being regardless of their ethnic or racial background. Let us speak out and demand that we do not stop wrestling with the difficult and complex issue of gun violence here in Maine and elsewhere. Let us not settle for a peace that is no peace through our silence while we await the next bloody headline and the next set of funerals somewhere in this beautiful land. Let us not settle for hypocrisy, this under functioning of our own discernment about constructive ways to move forward or else we will continue to

reap what we sow. Christ will be there with those whose tears are flowing, asking all of us, "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"