

“Today We Are All Hokies”

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Stone Mountain, Georgia
April 22, 2007

Once again our nation is mourning. Today we are all Hokies and our thoughts and prayers are with the students, faculty and staff at Virginia Tech.

Last Monday, a twenty-three year old senior by the name of Cho Seung-Hui went on a shooting rampage, leaving thirty-two dead and scores injured. This was the deadliest shooting in modern American history.

What should the Christian response be to this tragedy? This is the question I feel led to address as we gather to worship.

To be candid with you, this is not the sermon I prepared for today. That sermon can wait until another day. All week I wrestled with this question and yesterday I put my thoughts on paper. This morning I would like to share some ideas for you to consider even as you process your own thoughts and feelings.

As people of faith, we must let our beliefs shape our response to the tragedy that occurred in Blacksburg. To do any less is not to be a follower of Jesus. If our faith is not up to this challenge, then it is futile.

I don't believe this to be true. I think it is up to the challenge and can impact our response. So what do I think our faith should enable us to do in response to this tragedy?

First of all, it should move us to show compassion to all the people touched by this incident, including the gunman's family. As a matter of fact, the level of compassion we extend to his family is an indicator of the depth of our faith.

Certainly, we grieve for the families that lost loved ones and the entire Virginia Tech community. There is no question about this. These untimely deaths were cruel and senseless, breaking our hearts even more. As each one is laid to rest, we relive the horror of last Monday and the havoc it created for their family.

Let us not forget, however, that thirty-three people died that day and the last to die also left a family that is devastated. Speaking for that family, the shooter's sister, Sun-Kyung Cho said, “We are humbled by this darkness. We are living a nightmare. We have many unanswered questions as well. We feel hopeless, helpless and lost.”

We need to mourn their loss, too. Their lives will never be the same and their good name will forever be stained.

I recall the words of Lee Harvey Oswald's mother after he assassinated President Kennedy and was then killed by an assailant two days later. “My heart, too, is broken,” she said to a minister at the cemetery a month after her son was buried, “and no one has asked what they could do to help me.”

It is my prayer that the Christian world will embrace the gunman's family the same way the Pennsylvania Amish extended love and compassion to the family of Charles Roberts IV, the man that killed their innocent family members last fall. The depth of their faith was immeasurable. I hope ours will be, too.

Secondly, our faith should enable us to live life to the fullest as long as we have breath. We must live for those that were slaughtered. It is our final gift to them.

We must not retreat in fear or be paralyzed by despair. Life is too precious and sweet to spend one moment trying to recapture an illusion of security.

Sure we live in a dangerous world, but our faith should give us ample courage to forge ahead determined to make good things come from bad. “Hope rises in the heart when times are dark, as they are today,” Columnist Lorraine Murray wrote in a recent edition of “Grace Notes.” Knowing there is no situation so hopeless that God cannot embrace it and change it for the better is the basis of all we believe. If we do not believe this, then all else we believe is useless.

Our faith should motivate us to show the world the consequences of evil. The debate will linger as to whether the gunman was mentally ill or evil or both. Personally, I believe he was a mentally deranged person whose fantasies consumed him. Let me be quick to say, though, that not all mentally ill people are violent. As a matter of fact, less than one percent is.

Whatever Cho's reasons for killing innocent people that day, his actions were evil and caused unspeakable pain. The world needs to be reminded that violence always creates problems and leaves crippling, devastating pain in its path. Last week's shooting is another example.

I read with great interest yesterday in the Atlanta Journal Constitution the words of Imam Plemon El-Amin. He talked about how we use violence to solve international problems, express our frustrations through music and entertain children and adults at the movies or with video games. "We are all breathing a daily dose of violence. Just as we think we are going to get some kind of release by killing people in the name of war, this individual thought he could get some kind of release by killing in the name of his own personal war."

These are the words of a Muslim. How can followers of Jesus not blend their voices with his and call for alternatives to violence?

Our faith should cause each of us to examine our own lives and relationships to see what changes we need to make. Lama Surya Das, a Tibetan Buddhist leader said in response to this tragedy, "We have to look into the human heart. This is the true battlefield."

He's right. All of us have a shadow side because we are a combination of the good, bad and ugly. Our ugly side can also get out of control and hurt people. We need to recognize this and seek help just as we had hoped this young man would seek help and make changes.

Finally, our faith should compel all of us to own this problem. Every person of faith must participate in this dialogue and become a part of the solution. All of us must wrestle with some tough questions.

How do we respond to people that are struggling, especially those that resist our efforts? How do we help families that have grown weary trying to help family members they do not understand? What roles do the government and church play in making the world safer? What are the responsibilities of parents, neighbors, friends, teachers and administrators? How do we keep unstable people from hurting themselves and others? What can be done to prevent this from happening again?

I am convinced that God is counting on us to figure this out. I also believe He has confidence in us to do so.

He has certainly done His part by sending Jesus to help us. Could we have a better teacher or role model? He rolled his sleeves up and worked hard to solve society's problems. It became his passion. It was his priority. He confronted the ugly in people and offered new ways of thinking, believing and relating to others. He made personal sacrifices to make the world better. Ultimately, he became a wounded healer. He gave his life for the cause of justice and peace.

"Where is God?" Jewish theologian Martin Buber was asked. "He is between people. He is found in relationships connecting people." And so must we be if we want to be in the center of His will. We cannot be the presence of Christ in this world and be anywhere else.

How appropriate that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. That's where he lived his life and was destined to die.

Standing between people is scary and dangerous, especially if they are angry or disturbed. You can become the target for both. What would motivate you to take this risk?

"As I have loved you, you must love one another," Jesus said. "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" John 13:34 and 20:21.

When a nurse that was bandaging the wounds of an enemy soldier heard one of her own soldiers say, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars," she replied, "Neither would I." Surely there are some things we believe that bring the best out in us when the world expects the worst.

Remember how Jesus ended the story of the Good Samaritan? "Go and do likewise." I believe this is his message to us today, too.

In light of this, I wonder how God wants to use you this week to diffuse a volatile situation, reach out to a lonely person, help someone see the horror of violence, offer a new way of looking at a problem or bind the wounds of someone hurting. For the sake of peace instead of pain, be the presence of Christ.