

We are all still reeling from the death of 18 innocents and more than 50 others injured and countless others who's wounds are invisible. Everyone of us know someone or at least know of someone who knows someone who was directly affected by the carnage unleashed on Wednesday evening in Lewiston. And we are changed.

What shall we do with our outrage and anger, our sense of helplessness and grief?

Bishop Thomas Brown issued a Pastoral Letter, stating in part:

We are right to rage against the violence that has come to Lewiston and grieve our neighbors who have died and been wounded. Yet, as Christians, we must also turn our hearts toward the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, remembering that death is never the final word. We must redouble our commitment to work against the culture of violence that ensnares us and holds us captive. We must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we pursue a future filled with reconciliation and harmony and refuse to let the evil of gun violence extinguish our commitment to the common good.

He goes on to suggest some very practical responses, including making a donation to the Trinity Jubilee Center as an act of hope. Trinity Jubilee Center continued to remain open throughout the lockdown to provide a safe place for unhoused community members, and serve breakfast and lunch to all who are hungry, including students going without school meals and those who rely on donations from Bates College and Hannaford that were not available during lockdown. You can support the center by donating online or purchasing items from their Amazon or Walmart wishlists.

Clearly, we all draw strength from one another in just coming together. We take comfort from one another in simple gestures of care and kindness. As people of faith, we know that light can and does shine in the darkness, change is possible. When confronted with images of disaster, Mr. Rogers says to children, "Look for the helpers." Where are those helpers; who are those helpers? As we identify them, hope grows within us. Change is possible. Death and destruction does not have the final word.

Jesus has set us free to choose life over death. Love God; love neighbor.

"The truth will make you free!" Jesus declares in John. We are freely given God's grace, freely receiving all that is needed for salvation, and freely sent to direct our energies (not to earning God's favor) to loving our neighbor.

It's that last part that runs contrary to many contemporary definitions of freedom. Often, we hear that freedom is the ability "to do whatever the heck I want." According to Scripture, this is not freedom; it's another form of bondage to the vain pursuit of actualization through self-assertion and self-gratification. And that understanding of freedom results not only in bondage but death. Why? Because we were not created to live as individuals off on our own, divorced from the needs of our neighbor in the pursuit of self-satisfaction. We are to find our true nature and purpose (our call) through relationship with others. In this sense, Genesis' words "it is not good that the one created from earth be alone" is not simply about Adam as an individual but is applied to the whole of the human species. *We are made for each other!*

This is where Jesus' linking of two distinct commandments becomes so vital. In response to the question about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds by citing two commandments. Is he offering two options or naming the greatest and second-greatest commandment? I think it's more like this: The second commandment interprets the first. On the face of it, "loving God" and "loving neighbor" does not have to necessarily look similar and there are plenty of religious traditions that focus on the first independent of the second. But Jesus says the second is "like" the first, and he goes on to link them by saying, "*on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets.*" I take that to mean that these two are inextricably linked.

Paul says something similar later in his Letter to the Romans: "*All the commandments*" – that is, everything God wants us to do – "*is summed up in one word: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself'*" (Rom 13:9). As does the author of the Johannine letters, "*Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen*" (1 Jn 4:20). And in his account of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus linking this phrase – the law and prophets – to the "golden rule:" *do unto others as you would have them do unto you* (Mt 7:12).

There is a moving interview on CNN by a broken hearted saint living in Lewiston, Maine. His name is Leroy Walker, Sr. His son, Joey, attempted to stop the gunman with a knife before he was killed. Through tears streaming, Mr. Walker says before the camera, "I cannot hate; I was raised another way. I know there was something wrong with that man's brain; he was not created to do this. He has a mother and a father. I cannot hate him."

We discover true freedom, happiness, and self-actualization by living into our original purpose: to be joined to others in supportive relationships and caring community. This isn't simply God's intention and command, it is God's gift and promise. It offers to us a place from which to act and speak with confidence and, so necessary these days, with hope.

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22nd Sunday After Pentecost
October 29, 2023
St. Thomas' Church, Camden