

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

July 22, 2012

Sermon by The Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

It has been just under eighteen months since the shooting of Gabby Giffords and her aids at an Arizona shopping mall. The Valentine's Day massacre at Northern Illinois University seems like just last week, not four years ago. Before that, it was Virginia Tech, Columbine, and too many others in between.

There are few of us, I suspect, who did not take a mental inventory of our loved ones when we woke to the news of the shooting in the movie theater in Aurora Colorado the other day. And we all breathed sighs of relief that all were accounted for. After all, it could have been our children, our grandchildren, out for a night of entertainment, being among the first to see an anticipated movie opening.

And few of us do not mull over the hard questions. Why? What would cause someone to do such a thing, to violently take innocent lives? What can be done to stop this madness?

We crave answers, explanations. It is likely easier to attribute such things to terrorists or those with deep hatreds. Maybe there are ways to guard against those. But this week—at least so far—it is a mystery. This young man was a bit on the nerdy side, often a loner, but an honors student, a scholarship student who had been admitted to a competitive neuroscience doctoral program with an NIH grant, for heaven's sake. And so far, it seems that he had a decent childhood. What on earth happened to him to cause this senseless, dramatic violence—to use his scientific knowledge to booby trap his apartment with sophisticated explosives designed to kill and maim? To arm himself with assault weapons that, had they not jammed, would have caused even greater devastation?

These tragedies bring up the deeper questions, too, don't they? Where was God? How could God let something like this happen? It is what we call the question of theodicy—if God is all loving, all knowing, and all powerful, why do bad things happen to good people? For centuries, that question has been asked, and we're no closer to an answer.

Some believe that God has a plan, that there is meaning beyond what we are able to understand. For some, that brings comfort. I'm glad for them.

For some of us, though, it is impossible to reconcile a God who would cause such things to happen with a God who created us and our world with such delight and called it "good." A God who loves us. For us, there is a tension that we live with. A tension

between a God who does act in our world for good but who does not intervene in our misguided, human ways of exercising our free will. I don't know about you, but there are times that I want to cry out, "Enough, God. Won't you just intervene? Do something to get our world back on track?"

The gospel selections for this morning are a little unusual. On two other Sundays this summer we had what I have called "sandwich" stories—one story is split in two like the bread on a sandwich, and a second story is the filling in the middle. Today, though, we seem to have only the bread—a piece of 12 grain and a piece of kosher rye. The meat in the middle is missing. But don't worry, we'll get that next week. So we have two fragments where we simply find Jesus and the disciples in the boat, traveling twice across the Sea of Galilee, on their way to destinations. No great drama, no miracles, no teachings.

In the first part of the story, they are in search of a deserted place where they may rest from the constant demands of the crowds. That rest is never found, for the crowds guess where they are going and get there first. In the second part, they complete a different trip, going to the eastern shore to Gennesaret. And crowds are there, too. We find that Jesus' compassion overrides his personal need for rest, and he begins to teach and heal, ministering to all that come—the halt and the lame, the possessed, those forgotten and excluded from society.

The need for rest is real and clear. The needs of the crowds are real and enormous. What is not clear in our texts are the historical and geographical realities. In those days, Galilee was known as a place of diversity—a place of both Jewish and non-Jewish, or Gentile populations. When Jesus and the disciples sailed to the eastern shore, they were going into the Gentile territory that was under the control of the Romans. So, in crossing the Sea, Jesus and the disciples were also crossing a boundary—the boundary between preaching just to the Jews, the Chosen People, and to the whole of humanity. And in trying to cross that boundary, they often met with the storms and raging winds of opposition.

The lesson that endures as a model for us today is Jesus' persistence in crossing the boundaries, in his confronting the forces of resistance to carry out a ministry of love and healing, of reconciliation, of caring for the outcasts and the damaged, bringing all of God's people to wholeness even in the face of extreme danger. The needs of the people were the same, no matter who they were—Jew or Gentile. And Jesus' compassion was for both. He did not stay in one place. He did not settle for building an institution where he could be comfortable and just care for those who were closest to him and most like him.

As we look around us in our world, it often appears that we have not learned this lesson very well. The storms of opposition have been, and continue to be, strong. The ongoing struggles in Israel/Palestine, Syria, in Sudan. On and on it goes, religion against religion, race against race, people against people. In our own country, we see the senseless violence of Aurora, Colorado that seems to have no explanation as well as the rash of shootings in the heat of our cities that comes out of desperation and economic injustice. It has become so enormous and insidious that we despair of ever overcoming it. There is so much work to be done, so much need for healing and reconciliation.

It becomes overwhelming. We develop “compassion fatigue.” It is too much, what can we do about it anyway? Except to lock ourselves in, protect ourselves and those we love.

But that’s not the answer. It is not the model of compassion that Jesus gave us. We have to speak out. We have to be persistent in crossing the boundaries.

I *get* constitutional freedom. I understand that people want guns for hunting. I *get* a bit less the desire for guns for protection, though studies show that those who carry have a higher rate of injury and death from guns.

What I don’t get is this—we know how to profile people who get on airplanes, particularly when they have middle eastern features. We know how to pull cars over for questioning and searches when people are simply “driving while black, or driving while Hispanic.” The security of our country seems to override the risk of violating peoples’ freedom. Why, then, can’t we figure out how to intervene when someone buys a shot gun, an assault weapon and two Glocks in a two month period of time. And why can thousands of rounds of ammunition be purchased on the internet without raising an eyebrow? Are the lives of our children and young people not worth this risk of violating personal rights?

One of the General Convention resolutions that did not get a lot of press this summer was D003. It “requests every parish and diocesan workplace to declare their establishments as Gun Free Zones.” We know that some states allow people to bring weapons into public places, including churches. The resolution’s explanation notes that these laws vary, “but posting Gun Free Zone decals is one way for parishes and dioceses to exercise private property rights on behalf of the community.” This was not the first time that General Convention has passed resolutions regarding the handgun legislation.

We need rest from this violence. How nice it would be to just go away to a deserted place all by ourselves and rest a while. But we need compassion and reconciliation in our world, our country, our towns even more.

St. John's Episcopal Cathedral in Denver has this statement on its website: "This shooting is a terrible tragedy, and it is a great loss that senseless killing has become a part of our national life in recent decades. Yet this is not an occasion to abandon hope. It is not an occasion to break faith. It is rather an occasion to renew our commitment to love: to love our neighbors, both close and distant who are suffering; to love our enemies, who have wounded us so grievously; and to love God, who does not abandon us in tragedy, but chose to enter death itself, that life might be wrested from bondage in the tomb."

Rest eternal grant to them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.