

### **The Gift of the Counselor**

Psalm 109:21-25

John 14:22-29

In Dallas last week a man got out of a minivan, ran into a hair salon run by three Korean-American women, and shot them. According to an Axios News article published May 16<sup>th</sup>, he fled the scene and had not been apprehended. An African-American, he wore black from the mask over his head to his tennis shoes. All three women are expected to recover from their wounds.

Also this week, in Laguna Woods, California, in Orange County south of Los Angeles, a Chinese-American man chained shut the doors of the Geneva Presbyterian Church, in which a Taiwanese congregation worships, a sister church from our own denomination. He entered the coffee fellowship and opened fire with an assault rifle. A doctor named John Cheng attempted to tackle the shooter and was killed by over a dozen rounds. A retired former pastor of the church hit the gunman in the back of the head with a chair; others then subdued and tied him up with extension cords. Five others were wounded in the attack. Taiwan is ethnically Chinese but has kept its independence from mainland China since the civil war there in the 1940's. According to the L.A. Times, the shooter mailed seven diaries to a Chinese language newspaper in L.A., and left hand-written notes in his car. All these writings are now in law enforcement's hands, the newspaper having refused to print what a sheriff's spokeswoman described as "its hate-filled, unhinged rhetoric." She did comment that

the gunman angrily denounced Taiwan's independence.

Also last week, in Buffalo, New York, an eighteen year-old white man walked into a grocery store and opened fire with another assault rifle. Virtually every other person in the store was African-American. He livestreamed the attack on his Facebook page. For months he had posted violent, hateful language there about Replacement Theory, a demented, evil conspiracy theory too vile to merit description from a pulpit. One recent post detailed his plan to target a Black community somewhere in New York. He lived over 200 miles away from Buffalo and knew nobody in that store. He killed ten people, nine of them African-American. One fatality was a retired cop working as a security guard. Named Aaron Salter, he fired his pistol at the shooter, but the shooter's body armor repelled the rounds. Buffalo police managed a swift response and forced him to surrender before even worse carnage could ensue.

My purpose in telling these stories is to try to diagnose correctly what has happened in the United State of America. Is it racism? Is it too many and too lethal guns? As I have thought and prayed about these things, a process that has tragically extended across nearly all of my thirty-seven years in ministry, I have come to think these answers are too simple. They do not penetrate deeply enough into our cultural disease. Racism *is* a clear and proven motivation for each of the three shootings we described above. But I do not believe it tells the whole story. According to the Chicago Tribune, in the first nineteen weeks of 2022, 204 people have been killed by gunfire within that city's limits. But here comes a curve ball: 177 of those 204

homicides were committed by African-Americans against African-Americans.

Something more than racism is happening.

Again, we still have disturbingly high numbers of racists in our society. And for the record, I do think guns are too easily obtainable, and that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment can be interpreted to support the banning of military-style weapons. But what is that disease I hope to diagnose? What is it that leads a racist actually to kill people whose skin color he doesn't like? In a phone conversation with a member of this church last Thursday, I mentioned my plan to speak about this. She said, "Oh! What is wrong with their brains?" I think she was on the right path. There *is* something wrong with our brains, our hearts, our souls. I know that when all you have is a hammer, you see nails everywhere you look. I am a pastor, so you might expect this next comment. But I am convinced we have a *spiritual* issue on our hands. We have collectively turned away from the gifts of peace, wisdom and healing offered by the Holy Spirit of God. In their absence hatred can and does grow in far too many hearts.

John the Gospel writer details an interesting conversation in chapter 14.

Several times as Jesus speaks one or another of his disciples interrupts him with a question. In our verse Judas (not Iscariot) asks how Jesus will manifest himself to them after he leaves. (Jesus has just told them he must go to his Father's mansion to prepare a place for them.) Jesus answers that he and the Father "will make our homes with" those who put his love into action. Love as a verb is his answer. He wants his followers to "keep my words". He has been teaching inclusive, expansive

love for his entire preaching ministry. And he has kept his own word. He has acted it out. For example, he treated a Samaritan woman with respect, ignoring an ethnically-motivated hatred widely shared among the Jews.

Jesus keeps talking, promising the Holy Spirit “the Father will send in my name.” Scholars believe Jesus generally spoke Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect. For “Spirit” he probably used the word “ruach”, which according to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament means “breath, wind, any invisible power natural or unnatural”. This caused a problem for all four Gospel writers. They wrote in Koine Greek, the language of letters for those who wished to reach an audience broader than the Jews. What word should they choose to convey the sense of ruach? Greek gave them several options, none of them exactly equivalent to Jesus’ meaning. All four chose the same word: paraclete. This composite word has components that mean “alongside” and “speaker”. A paraclete is one who speaks on behalf of another. Thus, the Spirit speaks on behalf of the now-departed Jesus. But the meaning goes farther.

In the Roman system, a paraclete represented another in court. For this reason some have said the Holy Spirit is like a lawyer, our defense attorney, if you will. But this is not strictly accurate. The Romans did not have lawyers as we understand the term. Anybody could speak for anybody in their courts. We need to take all the meanings we have reviewed and roll them into one. The Holy Spirit speaks for Jesus. When we pray, the Spirit can plant new ideas, new understandings in us. The Spirit can give us other gifts as well. The Holy Spirit also defends us against turning aside

from keeping the words of Jesus. It can strengthen our resolve to live in love. It can help us turn away from temptations.

Jesus keeps talking. The Spirit will teach his followers, and help them remember “all that I have said to you”. In our Reformed Tradition we have always confessed that our knowledge of God and God's purposes comes via the work of the Spirit. In a few minutes we will recite one such confession when we read together from the Brief Statement of Faith of the PC(USA). Then Jesus says the words perhaps most pertinent to our national culture today: “Peace I leave you with; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.” Another word study reveals this peace, *eiranei* in the Greek, means more than the absence of conflict. It means harmony, wholeness, quietude, all with the under layering of moving us to work to give these gifts to one another. This is the single most important message of today's passage. Jesus gives us internal, healing, comprehensive peace. Peace that moves us to pass along the Spirit's gifts to others.

And Jesus tells his followers he does not give as the world gives. He means he will never take back his gift of peace. He means he gives perfect peace. He means we can trust his Spirit to calm our inner turmoil for ever more. He means we can trust his Spirit to empower us to maintain unity in the bond of peace that together we can offer his peace to the world for ever more. This spiritual gift of peace and peacemaking is one of the central messages of the whole Gospel. And it is the message we have to give to the world.

After all these years of life and ministry, I do not consider myself naive. I make no claim that if we could only sit Vladimir Putin down and share the Gospel with him he would withdraw his troops from Ukraine. I know better than to claim the peace of Christ will magically stop the shootings. I do, however, believe I have correctly diagnosed the human disease. These men (the overwhelming majority of the the shooters are male) do not have wholeness and peace in their hearts. They have corruption, envy, arrogance, hatred in their hearts. They have long memories for perceived insults and short fuses. Even if we somehow managed to pry the nuclear button and all those guns out of their hands they would find other means to commit their twisted violence.

Unless and until our nation can summon the political will to break the cycle of multi-generational family disintegration, criminally inadequate schooling, and grinding, hopeless poverty in our communities of color, we will never stop the shootings. Unless we work to make the love of Jesus real for all, we will never stop the racist conspiracy theories and the shootings they inspire. We start by working on our own hearts. We receive the Spirit and all its gifts. But we cannot keep our heads in the sand forever. Sooner or later we will suffocate down there. We need to proclaim—through word and deed—that real, permanent peace is available for the asking.

Jesus says, “If people love me they will keep my words.” They will love. They will make the love of Christ real through action. ***That's*** how we make peace. Slowly but surely, with the wind of God, the Holy Spirit, at our backs.