

The Rev. Jonathon Jensen
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh

Sunday after shooting in Squirrel Hill
October 28, 2018

On Saturday morning, more than 100 volunteers prepared to serve at the Calvary Bazaar with many more waiting to enter the church. The Bazaar is a tradition, more than fifty years old, to gather as a congregation to serve and raise funds for the community, particularly the East End of Pittsburgh. The Bazaar is a tangible expression of putting our faith in action.

On that same morning, a Jewish congregation gathered to worship. A man, filled with hate, made the choice to enter, Tree of Life, and hurt and kill as many people as possible there. Reports indicate the violence was not random but targeted and fueled by anti-Semitism. Eleven people were shot and killed with several more injured. We mourn with our Jewish neighbors and for our city and its citizens.

As reports of the shooting came through social and other media, the aura of excitement and happiness at the Bazaar suddenly turned to a somber pall of shock, uncertainty, anxiety, disbelief, and anger. We have heard this same story too many times but never this close to home. I listened to many people whose guard suddenly dropped and poured out a range of emotions. The church was opened for prayer, careful to make sure the building was secure as possible. We continued to serve those neighbors who came to the Bazaar. The annual event to build community and raise funds to put our faith in action to serve our neighbors in the East End suddenly took on a deeper meaning.

All throughout the day I received calls, emails, and text messages asking if we were okay. Facebook was filled with messages of residents in Pittsburgh who marked their status as “safe,” referring to the “Shooting at Tree of Life Congregation Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.” This is a very helpful tool to communicate quickly and efficiently with loved ones around the world. It is invaluable when multiple personal communications are difficult or impossible.

While I appreciate the thoughtfulness of those who communicated their status for their loved ones, we need another button. Facebook needs a status marker that declares, “I am safe but don’t feel safe.” “I am safe but feel profoundly sad.” That seems much more accurate. It seems more true after listening to many people who were one mile away and on the same street as those who felt safe when they went to worship at Tree of Life yesterday morning.

Let me be clear and call this act what it is from our faith tradition. This was evil perpetrated by an individual as a willful act of murder and attempted murder. This was a choice and not an accident. Further, the demonization of one group of people, to make them “other” and less than human for simply being who they are, is evil.

One never knows the full intention behind an act like this. Part of it is old fashioned anti-Semitism. Part of it is clearly to make people afraid, to feel unsafe. Multiple shootings have happened so many times we start to think this is normal and simply the way things are... that we

are powerless to change it. Places that are known for something good become attached to a horrific act of evil perpetrated on part of the community and remain seared in our memories. Columbine. Sandy Hook. Virginia Tech. Orlando. Las Vegas. Pittsburgh. We are being acclimated to feel unsafe, to be afraid, all the time.

How do followers of Jesus respond? Armed teachers in schools or armed priests in pulpits is not the answer. The beginning of the cure for the pervasive sickness we face, the way to meet fear, is faith. And God declares to us today, fear not. Do not be afraid.

Let me suggest that we have three related ways to respond in faith. First, there is a time to mourn. It is okay to feel sad. There is great sorrow in our city. Tonight is a service at 5 p.m. at the Soldiers and Sailors memorial in Oakland. It will be a gathering of Jews, Christians, and religious and civic leaders from across our city. We mourn together as a community.

Second, it is a time to pray. Prayer is an inherently good and transformational encounter. It connects us to God at the deepest level. It connects us to the people for whom we pray, the living and the dead. Prayer gives clarity and focus to our work in the world, putting our faith in action. Always be specific and intentional in your prayers. Next Sunday night at the Requiem Mass at Calvary, we will remember, by name, all the loved ones from our community and those from Tree of Life. These are our neighbors. They are our sisters and brothers. They are us.

Third, it is a time to put our faith in action. When good people do not speak up or act, evil becomes tolerated. Fear becomes accepted as normative or even expected. But it is not inevitable. Always be prayerful in your actions so they are grounded in good rather anger or hate so our actions do not feed further into fear.

Do not accept the degradation of a group of people for simply being who they are... Women or men of whatever color or nationality or orientation or whatever. Even with those whom you disagree, respond in love. God knows the world needs it.

With the frequency of mass shootings, it has become cliché to say our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families. Thoughts and prayers are not enough. If prayer does not lead to a change of heart and to action, have we really prayed at all? Will you exercise your constitutional responsibility and vote... for candidates, of whatever party, with the political and moral will to effect lasting change to end gun violence?

We are not powerless, and we are not called to live in fear. We are called, like Jesus, to pray and work for good. It does not have to be this way. Fear and evil do not have the last word.

Thoughts and prayers are powerful. Prayer and action, from enough people who work for good, can stop a bullet. Show the world that hate will not win here. Pittsburgh does not quit. We are black and gold and brown and white. And we will live together without fear, full of hope, and work for the good of all in our city.