

The Peace Which Transcends All Understanding

January 22, 2017

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:4-9 (NIV)

In my almost 15 years now here at Oak Grove there have been very few Sundays in which we have deviated from our sermon schedule, but today seemed like one to do just that. We gather this morning as part of a community which is grieving a very tragic event. We have many among us who were part of the event in one form or another. We have some among us who were very close to the event and probably witnessed things they had hoped they would never have to witness in their lifetime, and will which will stay with them forever. The intensity of it will lessen over time but it will always be there. And as a close knit community, every single one of us is affected in one way or another.

One of the things that surprised me on Friday in one way, and didn't surprise me in another, was just the number of people who said they didn't think that this would ever happen in a community like ours. Not in West Liberty, not at West Liberty-Salem School. And while most of the time I didn't say it out loud, I was saying to myself, "why?" "Why wouldn't we think it would happen in a community like ours?" In many ways we're really no different than almost all the other communities that events like this have happened. The pessimist or the realist in me, I prefer realist because it seems like a much more positive character trait, knew something like this was coming. It was just a matter of time. Though I must say I was in the same mindset as most of the other first responders hoping and praying that as we were responding they were going to come on the radio at any moment and say "this is just a drill." But that didn't happen.

The question today is not whether or not your community is going to experience one of these tragic events? The question is how is your community going to respond when you do? And I must say our community as a whole responded in as about as best of a way as humanly possible at every single level. From the staff and the teachers at the school, to all the students at the school, to all the first responders, and all the parents, grandparents and relatives of the children from the school.

As tragic as this event was, to experience an event like this and to have the outcome that it did, well it's about the best outcome we could have experienced, thanks to some heroic efforts by a few staff members, and all the others who were there and responded. Not taking anything away from the seriousness of the injuries to Logan Cole and the effect this will have on many people for a long time to come, to have no fatalities in an event like this is truly miraculous. That's the human response to the event.

But how about our faith response to the event? For a community which unashamedly proclaims itself to be “a Christian community,” this is one of those times to let our light shine!

How would Jesus respond to this event? First and foremost Jesus would have responded in the way Logan’s family has responded, asking for prayer not only for Cole but also for *the* other student who was involved and his family and by recognizing that somewhere and somehow God has a purpose for this. At this point we might know what it is but God allowed it to happen for a reason and many were spared for a reason. Somehow, in a way which we do not understand in our human wisdom, God can work simultaneously through His divine sovereignty and our free will.

Which made me think, was Jesus a pessimist, an optimist or a realist? I personally think Jesus was all three. He was a pessimist when it came to the world. Jesus knows the darkness that resides in the world and what we human beings are capable of. If Jesus wasn’t a pessimist when it comes to the world, then there was no reason for Him to have to die on the cross to save the world. Jesus was an optimist when it comes to hope in the future when all the darkness will disappear. And Jesus was a realist when it comes to our life in between. Which is why he says in John 16:33:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33 (NIV)

“In this world you will have trouble” is one of the great understatements Jesus made. We have trouble in many different ways. We have trouble in the many different sicknesses and disabilities that people experience during our life here on earth. We have trouble when tragic and horrific accidents take place. We have trouble when mental illness strikes, whether momentarily or over an extended period of time. We have trouble in all the broken families that exist in our own community, our nation and the world. We have trouble in a society which alienates so many people. We have trouble in a nation and a world which would rather divide than unite. We have trouble in not wanting to address the easy access to guns that we experience in our country today. We would rather take a side then try to come up with some humane way to deal with the problem. We have trouble in a media satirized culture that not only reports on these tragic and horrific events, but gives troubled people ideas.

You see, what happened in our school on Friday and what has been happening throughout our country for many years now is really the remnants of the Perfect Storm. So much has changed in our country in just the past twenty years and my days as a police officer. The first really big school shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, was not even 18 years ago, April of 1999. Prior to that, for an event like that to happen in a school was un-thought of . Oh, how times have changed. We shouldn’t think that something like this might not happen in our school or our community? Just like we shouldn’t think that this couldn’t happen to one of our children, both as a victim or as a shooter? Because when we do, we let our guard down and we fail to recognize the many complexities that have created the situation that we find ourselves in today. We fail to recognize just how important every human life is in the eyes of God. I find it interesting, more than just a mere coincidence, but a God thing, that we are addressing this on “Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.”

God is not just concerned about human life in the womb, He is concerned about human life at every stage, from our conception here on earth, to our death here on earth, and for all eternity.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, or the trouble you've seen, or we've seen. Yes, there are many bad things in this world, but there are many good things as well. We can focus on all the bad things in this world or we can focus on the many good things in this world:

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

In the days ahead some will question some of the things that were done and will focus on the negative or the bad. Not that at some point that might not have a role, for we always want to do whatever we can to improve to reduce the possibility of an event like what happened Friday from occurring and how we might be able to respond better. But if we focus on what was good, what was right, what was lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy there were lots of all those things.

While feeling called to this community by God almost 15 years ago now, sensing just how special this community was, after witnessing the events of Friday and the response since, whatever doubt there might have been in my mind of just how special this community is, that doubt is gone. After witnessing the events of Friday and since, there is no doubt in my mind of just how special the people that make up West Liberty –Salem School are. And academics is just a tiny part of that. If you have ever doubted just how much the staff and the teachers care about your children, after witnessing the events of Friday and the response since, don't doubt. People put their lives on the line to save your children!

Teachers and staff remained calm in the face of a very horrific and dangerous incident. While people serving in the military and police officers sign up expecting to face such dangers, teachers and educators don't. And I say that not putting West Liberty-Salem School up here and the other schools around us somewhat lower, because I think most of the other schools and communities that surround us would have had a pretty similar response.

And if you ever doubted how special your own child or children are, don't! The children did what they needed to do and not just individually but collectively as a group. They were just as much concerned about others as they were themselves, including their teachers. Several of the middle school children that we counseled yesterday, when it came to the end and we asked them what they would like us to pray for, wanted us to pray not for themselves, but for others. Not just for Logan and his family but for the shooter and his family. I really don't think that would have been my response when I was in middle school, or even high school. Maybe not even in college. That is not a human response. That is a Christian work of the Holy Spirit response.

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the early Christians in Corinth:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and

understanding that the Spirit gives,¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. Colossians 1:9-13

So, where do we go from here? I was also amazed at the words of another middle school student which was shared to me by someone who was counseling a group of them. One of the students stated “I just want to go back to the way it was.” One of the others responded, “no I want to go forward, we can even do better!”

As we move forward there is still a lot of healing which will need to take place and it will take time. Time is one of the great healers. Maybe second to the greatest healer, Jesus Christ. One of the other things that many of the children did share was fear. Fear of going back. And that is a legitimate fear. And I am sure that is a fear of many parents, as well as teachers and staff.

Do you know how many times God and Jesus said “do not be afraid?” I did just a quick search last night. Something like 80 times recorded in the Bible, including when Jesus was getting close to his end here on earth, recorded in John 14:27:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27 (NIV)

Jesus says, “do not be afraid.” Paul says “do not be anxious about anything?” How’s that working out for you by your own human efforts? Probably about as good as it is for me. You see, we can’t accomplish it by our own human efforts. It has to come from God. The Bible says that it is “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding.” That is human understanding as well as human efforts.

The same Jesus who said “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matthew 11:28-30 NIV) says “Come to me all you who are anxious and fearful and I will give you comfort and peace, for I am with you always.”

I close with what is the combination of the words to an old hymn and my own words:

*Christ is the world’s light, He and none other.
Born in the darkness, born to be our Savior.*

*Christ is the world’s peace, He and none other.
No one can serve Him and hate his neighbor.*

*Christ is the world’s life, He and none other.
May His life live in us forever.*

*Christ is the world’s love, He and none other.
May His love shine forth from us to one another.*

