

The Lord Will Be Our Light.

10-30-18

Dear Friends,

The news flooded our homes with images of grief from the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last Saturday. Eleven beloved members of that community were killed when evil walked into their midst with guns. The worshipers were targeted because they were Jews. The city grieves. It is a profound tragedy.

Shocked and horrified, we pray for help and peace. Even as shots rang out, love and courage ran into harm's way to rescue and to save. God never abandons God's people.

Though we are not abandoned by God, some of God's people died. The Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 brings a measure of peace. Those who died are God's. We are left. We grieve for good people's lives cut short, for the sorrow that sows, for the smallness of our own hearts and efforts toward peace.

There is no language strong enough to condemn fully the bigotry, hatred and prejudice that gives birth to violence. To kill another human being for their faith or the color of their skin, because of their ethnicity or orientation is a transgression against our Creator. It is not ours even to hate the haters. They are the goal of God's redeeming love.

What happened was terribly wrong. How do we live faithfully in a violent, selfish time?

The Tree of Life congregations are people of faith; so are we. Indeed, our Christian faith is deeply rooted in Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. The worshipers at the Tree of Life are our brothers and sisters; we love and serve the same God.

This is a time for us to live what we say we believe. Jesus said, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:15) Jesus lived that way. As reported on the October 29, 2018, edition of the PBS NewsHour, the faith of the Jewish community was demonstrated as the synagogue shooter, wounded, was taken to Allegheny Hospital in Pittsburgh. The CEO of that hospital, Dr. Jeffery Cohen, is a Jew and a member of Tree of Life. One of the nurses who cared for the shooter was the daughter of a rabbi. That rabbi came into the hospital because he was called and took care of the shooter as he would have cared for any other wounded person. Correspondent John Yang of the NewsHour interviewed Dr. Cohen, who said, "...we have a really simple mission here, certainly as long as I have been here. We're here to take care of sick people." Dr. Cohen met the shooter. The guy who was determined that all Jews must die was cared for by Jews. "Do unto others as you would have them done unto you..." How are we to live in this world? As Christians, we follow Christ.

Sunday night people of many faiths gathered at Temple Shalom in Wheeling to pray for healing and comfort, for an end of violence, and for peace. Christians and Jews know that faith does not protect us from pain and grief, but a relationship with God does show us the way through.

The events of last Saturday invite us to look at how we think, speak and act in an unsettled, anxious world. The New Testament tells us, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all..."

Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom. 12:18, 21)

God gives us a very different hope for the world than our lived experience. Yet we see glimpses of courage, compassion, comfort. Human beings sin; human beings hate. God loves; God forgives. Only God could have designed *forgiveness* to save the life of the wronged from the death of bitterness. God does set the prisoner free.

On the Sabbath all were wounded in the synagogue; not by bullets, but by hate. Evil entered a house of worship. It was unguarded, but a place of worship is not a ‘soft target.’ Those who enter engage the power of God. Though we share the grief of those who mourn, we also share their faith that in spite of death, there is life. The Tree of Life is not destroyed. Indeed, the roots will grow deeper and stronger as people remember the Source of life and hope.

The good news of God is both simple and profound: God made us; God loves us; God saves us. We can remember that. We can live that truth.

We can also *do* something to make the world a better place. Matthew 12:34 calls us to account, “How can you speak good things when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”

What is the abundance of your heart? We must all ask ourselves that question. In a time of great division and fear, to live in faith is to live in confidence that evil cannot prevail against the forward movement of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus died on the Cross, but *evil* did not win.

What does the Kingdom of God look like? Jews and Christians alike glimpse it in Isaiah 65:17-25. Depending on grace, we daily make decisions for peace. How?

Begin by listening. Listen to others, even when you don’t agree. Consider their hearts, their needs, their reasons. Stand against prejudice. Speak the truth in love. Drop hate from your thoughts and your vocabulary. Work for justice—BE just. Be kind. Live humbly. No one has all the answers. Remember, rarely is a serious problem solved by either/or thinking. There are usually many partial answers.

Fear less, love more. Humanize every encounter. See people, not ‘servers.’ They are not ‘just kids,’ old people, a different race or gender or political party. Embody respect: everyone has a story. Make someone’s day better because they have been blessed by you.

Let your life be a blessing in this world. Every life matters. Faith, as we have seen, is a matter of life and death. All people die, but not all people are free to live. We are called by God to share the gospel, to heal the broken, to proclaim forgiveness and to set people free to live and to love.

It is not enough to grieve a while and then to forget the Tree of Life tragedy. Let this event deepen our resolve to act faithfully, and to recommit ourselves to God, to one another and to peace. May we live as people of hope and blessing, witnessing to the promise of John’s vision in Revelation 22:1-5.