

“Reckless Love”

Colossians 3:13-15

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 August 2019

Friends, I have written and preached too many sermons in the aftermath of domestic violence at the hands of gunmen who have killed innocents. I’m sorry to report that my prayers, my tears, and my sermons—fervent, hot, and hard-wrung—have not stopped the violence. Neither have yours. Like you, I resort to the words of the Psalmist: O Lord, how long?

I asked a friend, “What am I supposed to preach today?” He said he had never heard this phrase before, but he’s been turning it over and over in his mind since the shootings: Christians are called to love recklessly. That wasn’t a direct answer to my question, but it was the best he could offer, and he offered it with tender care, and it was helpful. (I’m so grateful.)

The solution to all of society’s ills may boil down to statements like that. I agree, and I agree: Our call is to love recklessly. “Above all,” says Paul, “clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Love is your underwear and socks. Love is your shirt and your shoes. Love is not only how you live, but figuratively, it is how you dress.

Our love must have feet, of course, and we must gather together to meet, to pray, and to talk about how we move forward after such a long string of seemingly endless tragedies. Some of us refuse to accept these crimes as the new normal. The greatest tragedy of all would be that we do and say nothing. And another great tragedy would be that our disagreements about how to move forward would tear us apart.

In our closing hymn, we’ll sing this line:

*We need new eyes for seeing,
new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us, make us one!*

Every preacher I know will be criticized today. Criticized for keeping quiet. Criticized for saying too much. Criticized for being too liberal. Criticized for being too conservative. Criticized for being too buttoned down. Criticized for being too enraged.

But my preacher friends stand in pulpits today looking into the eyes of people they love; people who, not incidentally, pay their salaries. They look into the eyes of congregations who have prayed with the psalmist, *How long, oh Lord, how long*. They look

into the faces of people who disagree with one another, who feel enraged or impotent, resigned or riled up, people who aren't even sure what conversation they should be having.

Some say we as a nation must talk about gun control. Some would say we need new laws—banning assault rifles and closing the gun show loophole. Some would say we need to better enforce the laws we already have.

Some would agree with the statement from the National Council of Churches, and some would say this is poppycock. Quote:

We are deeply discouraged by the awareness of the near certainty that our elected officials will not respond in any meaningful way to this violence, for they are collectively and shamefully within the captivity of the gun lobby. Our elected leaders are guilty of negligence and cowardice.

Some would say this conversation doesn't involve Washington, DC, at all, but City Hall, the Statehouse, Main Street, becoming reacquainted with our next-door neighbors.

Some would say this isn't about guns but about mental illness. Some would say we must urge Congress to appropriate funds for the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention to research gun violence. Some would say masculinity has gone off the rails, and we must explore how young men deal with trauma.

Some say this is about the availability of better preschool. Others would say it's about prenatal care. Some would say it's about affordable or universal healthcare.

Some would say at the root of the problem is our public schools. Statistically, children of color have a better chance of going to jail than to college; some would say we must disrupt the school to prison pipeline for all children. But most of the shooters in these acts of domestic terrorism are not people of color, or immigrants, but white.

So, some would say this is about white supremacy and the prejudices that divide us. Some would say that hate talk from the oval office fans the flames and must stop.

Some say we need to talk about the return to basic civility, about the economy, or about the internet and the gamification of violence, or about bullying.

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What do you say?

How are YOU going to add your prayerful thoughts to the conversation? What actions are you putting on your to-do list? To whom do you need to listen, and from whom do you need to learn? How are you going to recommit to rebuilding our beloved community?

Love recklessly, my friend said. He's been turning that phrase over and over again in his head. I have too. Reckless, wide open, hospitable love is something we all must bring to bear on our work as peacemakers.

This afternoon we'll practice our skills by joining together at our annual Sholem Fest church-wide cookout. The very act of showing up says to the world that we believe in each other, we go out of the way for each other, we care about community, and we work hard building it. Showing up shows the world that we support each other, and we are trying, by the grace of God, to love each other. In this way, the church becomes a demonstration of the kingdom of God to the world.

Tomorrow night, some of you will be joining me at The Longest Table downtown on Main Street. The Longest Table is what they call "an engagement tool" that has been used by many communities to generate dialogue with people who might not normally eat together or talk with one another. Some 300 of us will meet over a family-style meal and we're going to talk about race, about the weather, about crime, about community, about U of I Football, about our children and families, about our dreams, about what we love about Champaign-Urbana, and about what we don't love so much, about what needs to be transformed. We'll talk about making our community stronger and more grace-filled.

And this week, YOU are going to make a difference by your acts of kindness, by your thoughtful contributions to making our community stronger and more humane.

Love recklessly, friends.

And . . .

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

AMEN.