

On Friday, I was honored to attend a Vigil in Support of the Muslim Community in Concord hosted by the Greater Concord Interfaith Council. As I stood outside the mosque in Concord with some 100 people in the rain and in the cold, listening to the names and descriptions of the 50 people killed in the terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, I couldn't shake the feeling that it could have been me. It could have been me in that one of the souls who was murdered was "30 years old and left behind a wife and two young children." Oh my God, I thought, that's me. And it could have been me because the perpetrator was a straight, white, young adult male. Oh my God, I thought, that's me.

In reality, neither are me. I am not a member of a religion that is marginalized and feared within its context. And I am not a hate-filled bigot who would kill innocent worshippers. In reality, I am a leader in a religion that is culturally acceptable if not normative in its context and my unearned and undeserved external identifiers have given me access to a place of privilege in our society.

This combination scares me. It scares me because it is very easy for me to fall into the trap of believing that my experience of multi-faceted privilege is how life can and should be for everyone else and that those who don't enjoy such a life simply aren't trying hard enough, don't have the desire, or are somehow predestined to suffer. It is this kind of twisted thinking that can infect and poison someone's mind, and lead them to do unspeakable evil. In

the extreme, such evil leads to mass murder, but it always begins with the inability and unwillingness to see the image of God in a person and to the respect the dignity of every human being. It continues when we fall prey to the implicit biases that we are taught about others.

An implicit bias is something that happens to everyone on a daily basis. It is the little mental shortcut which we've learned from the culture around us that, in many ways helps us make our way in the world, but can also be very destructive. A harmless example of implicit bias is that when I say "peanut butter" you're probably thinking about... jelly. A harmful implicit bias is that when I say terrorist, you might be thinking about a Muslim. Well, the events of the last week, and months, and years, show me that that implicit bias, that terrorist equals Muslim is untrue--white men can and are just as capable of being terrorists and any other person. Unchecked implicit biases can kill.

While not as extreme, we see an example of this kind of thinking in our gospel reading today. Some who are present are asking Jesus if the people who died untimely deaths as victims of a cruel political leader are somehow worse sinners than other people. The implicit bias that is operating here is the notion that "bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people." Or put another way, the implicit bias that is operating here is that when good or bad things happen to people, they somehow "deserve" it. Since those guys got killed by Pilate, surely they were worse than others, right? To this Jesus unequivocally says No. And then, he offers a stern warning. First the denial.

Jesus is clear that the murdered Galileans, as well as the 18 people who were victims of an accident, were not to blame for their fates. They were not worse sinners than anyone else and they did not deserve to die in that way. That's clear. What's not as clear is what follows. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will all perish as they did." Um, excuse me? What's Jesus getting at here? "Unless you repent you will all perish as they did."

To help us unpack what's going on here, we must look at the larger context within the Gospel of Luke. Last week's gospel reading was Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, when Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" This comes just a few sections *after* our reading today from the same chapter. *Before* our reading, Jesus is talking about the immanent nature of the Kingdom of God and how important it is to have things in order before the coming of the Kingdom of God. This sandwich of repentance and lament offers us the interpretive key for our reading today. Without we might draw the wrong conclusions about Jesus' harsh words.

Side note—You may wonder sometimes why we preachers feel the need to contextualize the readings from our lectionary. The reason is because context matters. If you only see one scene of a movie, you're not going to really know what's going on. You'd want to rewind and bit and then keep watching to understand that scene more, right? It's even better to watch the

whole movie as well. A few times if you really like it, and especially if it's confusing or challenging. The same is true for scripture, hence the notes about context. Ok, sidebar over.

What I believe Jesus is saying with his warning to repent is that life can end in an instant and the time to turn to God is *now*. This sentiment is expressed in one of the petitions within the Great Litany which we prayed on the first Sunday in Lent. "From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence, battle, and murder; and from *dying suddenly and unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us.*" These days I know many wish for a swift and painless death, and often for good reason. In the face of debilitating illnesses, quantity of life is much less important than quality of life. And yet, to die suddenly and unprepared is to have life cease without the chance to repent, without the chance to turn to God.

So what happens if you don't? Here the context is key once again. Jesus laments over Jerusalem, that its inhabitants have turned away from God. But he doesn't then say that, if they don't turn around he's going to burn it all to the ground. Instead, he desires their repentance that he might "gather [Jerusalem's] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

We are called to turn to God not so that we get burned by the unquenchable fire, but so that we can be embraced, loved, and forgiven whoever we are, just as we are. And the time to do that, Jesus is saying, is not right before we die, as if we could simply settle-up with God after all is said and done.

Rather, because we don't know when we may die, whether it be by accident or criminal act, the time to turn to God and let God embrace and love us is always *now*.

That's what this season of Lent is trying to tell us. We are dust, and to dust we shall return, and since we don't know when or how we'll get dusted, the time to repent and turn to God is *now*. In other words, Lent helps us to think about the quality, not the quantity of our life. Yes, God *will* forgive us on our death bed. That's the Good News. The Good News is also that we don't have to wait until death comes to live a forgiven life, to know the embrace of a loving, patient, and compassionate God, and to share that love by bearing good fruit, even when it takes a little help from the gardener.

The God that we know and love is the God who used Moses to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and provided for them as they journeyed through the wilderness. Paul uses this example to warn the church in Corinth not to be like the grumbling, unappreciative Israelites but to remain faithful and *keep* turning to God, trusting that God will always give us what we need through the ups and downs of life. It is this God, made known to us in Jesus Christ and alive in us through the Holy Spirit, that grieves for every loss of life and every act of violence and hatred as far away as New Zealand and as close to home as our own hearts. And it is this God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask for or imagine, whose grace and love are what allow us to bear good fruit, and who accompanies and encourages us as we take intentional steps on our spiritual journeys. It's these

Year C Lent 3

3-24-19

Rev. Drew Courtright

little steps that we take each day which turn our lives toward God and will turn the tide of fear, hatred, bigotry, and violence that so infect our world. It's these steps, with God's help, that will bring about a world where we can all worship in peace, where our guns will be beaten into plowshares, and where there will be weeping and crying no more.

Amen.