

“Healing the Soul of our Nation”

Based on Hebrews 9:11-14, 24-28

First delivered Nov. 11, 2018

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As I reflected on the scripture for this morning, I couldn't stop thinking about the violence that is sweeping our country. Two Black people killed at a Wal-Mart. Two women killed at a yoga studio. Eleven Jews killed at a synagogue. And then this past Wednesday twelve people killed at a bar. So much violence. So much death. And that's just the killings that make the national news. People are being shot and killed all the time all across America.

Someone I know made the observation that all these shootings had nothing to do with blue states or red states. It isn't about politics. These killings are driven by hate: hatred of black people, hatred of women, hatred of Jews, hatred of people in general. All this violence is fueled by broken people filled with hate. And yet, there is so much arguing over politics. Are we ignoring the fact that there are so many people among us who are disconnected, angry, lost?

We are confronted with a necessary question: what can we do to change the direction our society is going? I see all this violence and hatred in our society as a sign that there is something wrong with our society. We could push for gun control laws. Maybe you saw a mother who lost her son at the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar this past Wednesday. Her son was at the massacre in Las Vegas last year. He was able to escape that, but not this one. With a fierceness in her eyes, as she stood before the cameras, she cried out that she doesn't want anyone's thoughts and she doesn't want anyone to send her prayers. She wants gun control laws. She finished her statement saying, “No more guns!” So much pain in her voice. Surely something could be done to limit access to weapons.

But gun control laws are not enough. Our problem of violence and hatred goes much deeper. What I see is a blight on our national soul. Maybe this wouldn't be the case if these mass shootings rarely happened. But there are so many, and it seems to be increasing. It makes

me wonder that what we are dealing with is beyond individual persons who are broken or mentally disturbed. It seems so much greater.

I have a friend who talks about this by using the image of the fish and the lake. If you walk by a lake and you see a fish lying dead on the shore, then you wonder what might have been wrong with that fish. But if you walk by the lake and see hundreds of fish lying dead on the shore, then you wonder what might be wrong with the lake. I say there is something wrong with the lake we are swimming in. There is something wrong with our national soul.

So what I am asking us is: what can we do to bring healing to the soul of this nation? What can we do so there is less hate and less violence in our society? I think this passage from Hebrews may point to an answer to this question.

To understand this passage, you need to know a little about the Jewish festival called the Day of Atonement. On this day, the high priest would go into the holy of holies, the central room of the Temple, carrying with him the blood from an animal sacrifice. In this room, a room the high priest alone can enter, and only on this day, would be an altar upon which sat the ark of the covenant. Above the ark would be two angels facing each other. The high priest would take some of the blood and sprinkle it upon the altar as an act of purification, not only for his own sins, but for the sins of all the people that had been committed over the past year. This ritual act would purify all the people. Their sin would be atoned for. And then, next year, on the Day of Atonement, the process would repeat, year after year.

The preacher, the one who offered this sermon that we call Hebrews, looks to the high priest on the Day of Atonement as a prototype for Jesus, the one whom he calls the true high priest. Jesus performed the ritual of atonement for all the people. But he didn't enter the holy of holies. He entered heaven itself. And he did not bring the blood of animals. He shed his own blood. And he doesn't have to go back into heaven to shed his blood year after year. He only had to do it once for all.

So the good news is that God, through Jesus, has dealt with the stain of sin once for all. If God is holy, and we are unholy, then God

through Christ has made us holy so that there is no obstacle between us and God. As the preacher puts it in vs. 14, God has purified our conscience from dead works to worship the living God. By an act of sheer grace, God has done what is needed so that we can be in God's presence with no fear.

What this is getting at is deliverance from the blight of guilt and shame that tears our souls apart. See, in those days, if you had done anything sinful you would offer up an animal sacrifice so that you would become ritually pure again. But on the Day of Atonement, a sacrifice was made on your behalf to cover all your sins that you either didn't know about or that you never got around to offering a sacrifice for yourself. The purpose of the Day of Atonement was to make sure that you were ritually pure. If you were afraid that you may be guilty of something, or you were weighed down with shame because of what you had done, the intent of the Day of Atonement was to lift that burden off your soul so that you could be free, so that you could worship God and be in relationship with God and each other with a clear conscience. Well, Jesus has offered Himself as a sacrifice on your behalf, and just once, which is good enough to cover all your sins for your whole life. God has acted to deliver you and me from guilt and shame.

This liberation from the corrosive power of guilt and shame is communicated in Hebrews through the lens that Jews and Jewish Christians would understand, the lens of Jewish ritual. They would have gotten it, connecting the Day of Atonement with what Jesus did in his crucifixion. But we don't really get the Day of Atonement, or the whole blood sacrifice thing, ritual purity and all of that. We can know about it but it's not part of who we are. We don't understand it in a deep way. How can we understand what Jesus has done for us without explaining it through the lens of blood sacrifice and the Day of Atonement? How can we understand it in a way that makes sense to our own lives?

Maybe it is as simple as claiming with faith this truth: God's grace is sufficient to cleanse us from our shame and guilt. Of course we feel guilty when we screw up. That's a necessary feeling so we realize we have caused harm and that we need to take responsibility to make things right the best we can. God's grace enables us to receive that feeling of

guilt as a prompt to make things right and then to release that feeling of guilt rather than allow guilt to fester within us.

Shame, on the other hand, is much deeper. It is less a feeling than it is a state of being. It is a sense of being less than, damaged goods, unworthy. It is a state that has less to do with things we have done and more to do with how we have been treated by others, particularly those close to us who have said to us that we are not worthy, that we are less than, that we are not good enough, that we are failures. Shame is the result of harm done to us. But even here, God's grace is sufficient. God has made us worthy, God has redeemed us, reclaimed us, in the process of restoring us. With God we belong, we matter. With God we don't have to grovel or shrink back in fear. No we can stand in God's presence and we can worship God in the fullness of who we are. We are precious to God. We are God's children. That's what God has made possible through Christ. Shame does not have to weigh us down any more. There is a remedy to the blight of guilt and shame on our souls. There is a balm in Gilead.

What God has done through Jesus is not just a remedy for guilt and shame, I believe it is also a remedy for violence. I wonder if what drives violence, at its root, is guilt or shame? Maybe not guilt so much, but definitely shame. I wonder if those who have perpetrated these killings we have heard about on the news were burdened with guilt but, more deeply, full of shame. Did our society give them the message that they were damaged goods, failures, screw ups? Did the pain of shame prompt them to lash out at others to release the negative energy of their suffering that they either didn't know how to deal with or got the message that no one really cares about their suffering? I wonder how many people who live among us, who are weighed down with guilt or shame, who don't know that they don't have to carry that guilt and shame any more. And because of the pain of that weight they carry on their souls, they release the pain through violence, either to themselves or by inflicting pain on others.

This gets to the big question I asked earlier: what can we do to bring healing to the soul of the nation? We can be conduits of God's grace. We can be quick to forgive, forgive ourselves as well as forgive

others, although forgiveness doesn't excuse us or others from making restitution for the harm that has been done. Forgiveness is not a get out of jail free card. We can forgive and we can also see other people as having inherent worth. We all screw up. Each of us fails. We fall short of expectations we place on ourselves or expectations others place on us. But we are still worthy, we are still precious, we still belong. And it's that basic approach toward people, that they are worthy, precious, belong, without reservation. This is how we can approach people. People need to know that they matter to somebody. We can be the ones who communicate that, through our words and actions, that every person matters to us. In a small way, such a posture, grounded in what we know about what God has done through Jesus, can let in a glimmer of light in the dark prison of shame that so many people are trapped in. And I believe that anything we do to ease people of their sense of shame about themselves will lessen the possibility of violence.

This is not the only thing we can do. Forgiving ourselves and others, relating with people in ways that communicate that they are valued and worthy, this won't fix everything. Peace and harmony won't break out everywhere. We live in a shaming culture. It is the water in which we swim. We receive messages all day long that we aren't good enough. But, by forgiving others and ourselves, by treating others with respect and by respecting ourselves, at least we are not furthering harm. We are resisting the "not good enough" message. It is a place to start to heal the soul of our nation, to lower the temperature, to minimize the possibility of the manifestation of violence.

Claim this good news for yourself, for the guilt and shame you carry. With faith in God's love for you, let that guilt and shame go. Release yourself from its weight. Know that you are forgiven. Know that you are worthy. Not by anything you have done but by the sheer grace of God. God has declared that you are worthy. Believe it. Live into it. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise, that you are worthy, you are loved, you matter, you are somebody.

And then, share this good news with others. Let other people know that they are worthy, that they are loved, that they matter, that they are somebodies. Let them know it by how you treat them. It may or may not

make a difference. Shame, in particular, is deeply ingrained in the psyche. It takes time to draw that poison out of us and out of others. And we swim in a lake filled with the toxin of shame. So this isn't a quick fix. But it is something, to treat others with the dignity that God has established through Jesus. It is at least an attempt to reduce the violence that is running rampant through our land. To treat others with dignity may even save lives. It is worth the effort.