

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
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Psalm 25

In you, LORD my God, I put my trust. I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause. Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant. For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. They will spend their days in prosperity, and their descendants will inherit the land. The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me! Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, LORD, is in you. Deliver Israel, O God, from all their troubles!

Right Paths

See, I knew on Wednesday afternoon that the shooting had happened, I knew it had happened again children – high schoolers this time – cut down in hallways and classrooms of their school -- but when it came time to lead the Ash Wednesday service, the first opportunity this week to acknowledge this horrible thing...I didn't say anything.

And I've been thinking about that ever since. As I've just said it wasn't that I didn't know, hadn't yet gotten word. It wasn't that I thought it was somehow incompatible news with Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent – though I had labored hard to join Valentines Day and a theme of love with the beginning of Lent and the ashes and acknowledgement of this terrible thing would be yet another dimension.

It was as much as anything *that I simply had no words.*

We pastors are meaning makers. But I could find no words to make meaning of this. So, for better or for worse, I just didn't mention it.

Let's take a pulse check this morning. How are you doing since learning that 17 people, 14 students and 3 adults, died due to another act of gun violence in our country? How are you doing since learning details of the 18th school shooting

this year? How is it with your soul since you learned of the deadliest shooting since Sandy Hook elementary school? Are you dismayed? Angry? Numb? Wanting the pastor to address this? Or had you been hoping she might not?

This week, on Thursday after this happened, I received an anguished post from Jenny. "I can't stop crying" she said. *What can we do?*

This week my sister-in-law Amelia, who lives in the South, my sister in law Amelia who I really do not know very well, posted a Facebook post. She shared her dismay, her sorrow. And she wondered if perhaps adults have become too busy – that here in our country "we've lost our connection as adults to the children in our lives. We don't take time to look them in the eye, to see their silent longings. We buy them things instead of holding them and guiding their steps. We are too busy to "raise them". (She paused...left some space in her post) then wondered if something we could all do is spend time now with someone very young or someone very old, "Those," she said, "most left behind in our techie world."

Then she concluded by saying she didn't have answers. But she knew God did. Now Amelia is an evangelical. Her theology, her way of talking about her faith is quite different from mine or from her brother, my husband. Sometimes to me, to Mike, the words, and the approach are just too simple. But I wondered this week if she, Amelia, was saying something I very much needed to hear. If we are people of faith, and if we are dismayed, angry, distraught over what is happening in our country – the prevalence of gun violence--we do need to look to God, we do need to look beyond ourselves and our clever commentary, we do need to look beyond our political centers to which we all too quickly rally. We do need to look up and look to God.

The psalm that is our scripture lesson today begins with a prayer, or, it rather it begins with a great description of prayer. "To you, Lord, I lift up my soul" In Israel one would lift up one's hands in prayer, a gesture of entreaty. It's a gesture you may have seen a few times by Olympian skiers, snowboarders and skaters – sometimes it looks like Thank you God and other times, when there is a fall, or a series of spills, it looks like Now how did that happen? But it is the same gesture as a gesture of prayer – Arms lifted out and up, reaching for something beyond ourselves.

To you, Lord, I lift up my soul. Maybe you don't think you are very good at prayer. But prayer is lifting up our soul to a power beyond us lifting up our deepest longings and yearnings, and despite the derision about "thoughts and prayers" that is going on these days, we ought to be praying today – praying, that is, if we want to get beyond feeling hopeless, or feeling like we just want to turn the TV off, or hide under the covers. We lift up our souls because God helps us face the things that must be faced.

The psalm, you may have noticed, goes on to speak of being taught. The way to walk in God's ways is to first learn them, to have knowledge of God's ways that then guides us in our daily walk. "Show me how you work, God, school me in your ways" the psalmist says. There is a confidence in God as a guide, and as a corrective presence.

"God corrects the misdirected, sends them in the right direction" is the way Eugene Peterson translates one of the lines of this psalm. This reminds me of the UCC statement of faith which speaks of God saving us from "aimlessness and sin". Sin might be that wrong thing we knowingly do. but *aimlessness*....that speaks more to our human condition, our tendency to put our energies into the wrong things and then not to realize the damage to self and to others that that is doing. In bible study this week someone reminded us that the ancient Greek word for sin, *hamartia*, means literally "missing the mark".

What if one way of thinking about God was as the right direction, the right path, as the way that leads to healing, and wholeness and life? If we cry out our despair about what happened this week, how might a God who guides us guide us today? How might such a God lift us from despair towards hope?

Cameron Caskey was one of the survivors from Parkland High school interviewed on TV, and like many of the young people who are speaking up out of their experience, I was impressed by his ability to speak his truth. He said "this IS the time to be talking about guns. We do appreciate the prayers and support from around the country but our community has just taken 17 bullets to the heart. And it feels like the only people who don't care are the people making the laws." Out of the mouths of high schoolers. Our young people are saying the things that need to be said. They are not saying this is just one troubled youth, or that young people need better access to mental health – though that may be true. They are saying now is the time to be talking about *guns*, and why any young person – a person not even old enough to buy a drink, for goodness sake --- needs an assault rifle.

It is one of the hardest things, to move from despair to action. That is why we need to believe that God is in on this, that God hears our cries, the cries of bereaved parents and the cries of parents worried about a world where their kids don't feel safe. I realize that many people who love God may feel worried about infringement of 2nd amendment rights. But surely our founding fathers weren't imagining troubled young people and assault rifles, such a deadly combination. As someone on Facebook said, we may be able to handle having 3 ounces of liquids on the plane, but we willingly follow that restriction to our liberty for the wellbeing of everyone. It doesn't matter that some people can handle their AR-15. The wellbeing of the children in this country -- isn't that greater, a greater right than the right of everyone to be able to purchase such a weapon?

So we should be praying -- not just for an end to the violence, but for the willpower to speak up and yes, do something to make our voice heard on this matter.

Currently the United Church of Christ is speaking about "Three Great Loves" that make up our walk as Christians.

Love your neighbor.

Care for the children.

Protect God's Creation.

How are we caring for the children in our response to this event?

John Dorhauer, General Minister and President of our denomination, the UCC lifted up an appeal this week: "As we begin the season of Lent, let us all reflect deeply on how we worship violence and rely far too heavily on brute force to get our way, resolve our conflict, or express our rage. Let us commit to turning around a Congress beholden to the Military Industrial complex and the NRA when next we cast our vote. Let us use our time in worship to not only pray for the victims of this and all other random acts of violence, but to remind the people of faith with whom we gather that violence begets violence and that the way of Jesus is the way of peace." (UCC.ORG)

Reverend John Vertigan, Pastor and Conference Minister of the Florida Conference of the UCC urged pastors to find their people, to console them. He then said People, find your pastors today and "ask them to lead with you in a movement to end violence in our communities. Remember especially the people of Parkland, Florida, whose anguish cries out and whose pain demands justice. Help build communities where this doesn't happen. Use your own compassion and power to heal this national sin. And yes, continue to pray."

So in the spirit of the psalm and in the spirit of this day we do pray:

God, turn our anguish into action.

Guide us in your paths.

Show us how you work, God, and school us in your ways.

Amen.