

**Rev. Quentin Chin Sermon**  
**Ninth Sunday after the Pentecost**  
**August 11, 2019**  
**Northfield, MA**

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
Luke 12:32-40

Last weekend's shootings in El Paso and Dayton were horrible. Since then, we've endured a tsunami of news. Emotions and speculations. Anger. Exasperation. Frustration. Powerlessness. Finger pointing. Inaction on gun regulations. Charges of racism and white nationalism. Mental illness.

Politicians weighed in. Doctors diagnosed. Pundits pronounced. Amid all the competing voices, we try to make sense of the senseless.

We need prayers. Certainly prayers for the victims, their families, and their communities. Certainly prayers for the first responders and medical teams. We may even pray for sensible gun regulations and substantial help for people with mental illness.

As clergy, we don't stand completely neutral. I don't believe in the simplistic beliefs on the extreme ends of the spectrum that removing all guns or equipping everyone with a gun will make us safer. We need sensible and reasonable, evidence-based gun regulations recognizing that overwhelmingly gun owners are responsible and not mentally unfit. I believe that racism shackles us as a nation and must be addressed. Though we can blame irresponsible racial rhetoric by our political leadership for fanning its flames, we also have to acknowledge even some of the most well-intentioned people can be racially insensitive. And I know this from firsthand experience. As for mental illness, while we will argue that more needs to be done for treatment, we should not overlook that traumatic experiences in childhood, such as living in a

household mired in poverty or having a single parent or living where alcohol or drug abuse is present, can lead to mental illness later in life.

We also have to be honest. We can pass the most stringent gun regulations tomorrow, but that won't make El Paso and Dayton the last mass shootings when we have more guns in this country than people. As horrible as mass shootings are, we should recognize that they make up a very, very small percentage of gun deaths annually. In 2017 the CDC reported almost 40,000 gun deaths of which 60% were suicides and 37% were homicides.<sup>1</sup>

The missing voices this past week were theologians. Where once theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr were household names, today's theologians seem to talk only among themselves. At one time a preacher's Sunday sermon might be a column in Monday's paper, today most people in our communities don't even know the name of the local clergy.

Theologians offer a different perspective often grounded in ancient wisdom. They also offer a longer view.

Two short observations. First, a few years ago I visited the Alamo in San Antonio, TX. Panels inside the compound presented a history of Texas. Texas was once part of the Mexican Empire which covered much of the present American southwest. As this nation expanded from east to west, settlers of European descent began to establish themselves in what is now Texas and over the years changed the social fabric and racial mix such that the settlers agitated to establish their own republic independent of Mexico, which they did.

The second illustration is Carmi, IL. A few years ago, Amy, Allegra, and I stopped for a couple of nights in southern Illinois. One night we went to dinner in Carmi, a town of around

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/gun-deaths.html>  
August 11, 2019  
Page 2 of 6

6500, which was way bigger than Grayville, where we were staying. Driving through its downtown on Friday night, we saw lots of empty storefronts in what seemed to be a once prosperous community. No nightlife, other than the Dairy Queen.

These observations gave me two insights into the state of our nation. The first is social. Immigration has added to the cultural churn which has been at work across our nation for two generations due to movements such as post-modernism, feminism, racial identity and awareness, and sexual fluidity. The second is economic. Globalization and technology have impacted almost every aspect of our industrial infrastructure and capacity, which have hollowed out once prosperous communities like Carmi and dashed economic security for millions of people as they face their retirement years. Our nation today does not reflect what we imagined it would be 50 years ago. Our nation today is incongruous with the myths we have created about ourselves and for ourselves.

Over 20 years ago, Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, saw the trends in America and equated them to Judah's exile to Babylon. He maintained that we are exiles in our own homeland. Brueggemann wrote, "...exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith, were mocked, trivialized, or dismissed."<sup>2</sup> He went on to describe six aspects of exile. Though all are important, two stand out for me: The greatest threat to exiles is the power of despair and the danger in exile is to become so pre-occupied with self that we cannot get outside of ourselves to rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. **Cadences of Home Preaching Among Exiles**. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY 1997 Page 2.  
August 11, 2019  
Page 3 of 6

I often think that Brueggemann's assessment was far more accurate than anything else I've heard or read. The displacement many people feel in this nation is a type of grief or mourning, which then gets manifested in ways that are not always healthy. An extreme example is resorting to violence. More subtle are the effects of stress that grief imposes upon our bodies and our psyches.

Without the certainty of the past and the absence of reliable cultural markers, we gaze into an unknown future, and that is frightening. Our moorings are gone.

Scripture, our ancient stories, recounts many people who walked into their unknown future equipped only with their faith in God's grace. Abraham heard God tell him to leave his homeland with the promise that he will become the father of a great nation. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem from Moab, Ruth chose to stay with her and, consequently, entered a foreign land. Of course Moses led Israel from Egypt between walls of water to their freedom. All of them had faith. All of them trusted God.

Despair can lead to destructive behaviors because those who suffer have nothing to lose. Those in despair believe they have lost their privilege and authority. Their dreams evaporated. The mythology that defined them proved false.

In a sense, they may see their loss as punishment for something they did not do. We have no control over the economic wreckage due to globalization and technology. How do we find meaning and coherence when social churn is relentless and unstoppable? How many remember that immigration has been our nation's story since its beginnings? How many people have forgotten their own immigrant family histories or have mythologized it by claiming, "they came legally?"

Fear. Fearing change. Fearing the unknown. Our instincts in response to fear lead us to freeze, fight, or flee. But we can't flee when we are home because as exiles we're not home. Then we freeze or we fight. We freeze and don't do anything as though we're dead. We want a savior to rescue us, to revive us, to restore what was. We fight because we're not going to accept this any longer. We will take control by whatever means to stop the social and economic forces pressing upon us.

Seeking a savior to lead us. Seeking control to stop the tsunami. Those are not the unfailing treasure. The savior to lead us is not someone we elect, whether Republican or Democrat. That savior is Jesus, who told us to be dressed and have our lamps lit. That savior is the one who will come to serve us. Furthermore, we cannot stop the tsunami. Believing we have control to stop it is a fiction we use to assuage ourselves. The control we have is how we respond, not in fear, but in service, as slaves to one another and to the stranger and to the widow and to the orphan and to the alien among us.

Brueggemann proposed three possible responses to our exile.<sup>3</sup> The first two, assimilation, which is what some Jews did during their exilic period in Babylon, and despair, which is the "grim resolve of Stoicism," are forms of giving up and resignation. The third response, however, is "fresh, imaginative theological work, recovering old theological traditions and recasting them in terms appropriate to the new situation of faith in an alien culture."

In practical terms, we revisit, reimagine, and reclaim the fundamentals of our faith, Jesus' teachings: servanthood, compassion, generosity, love, forgiveness, gratitude, reconciliation, and peace. Though they may look different, these are our moorings. We should open our eyes and

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 116  
August 11, 2019  
Page 5 of 6

unstop our ears so we can comprehend the forces pressing upon us in order to respond faithfully to the gospel. I remember years ago serving communion and the deacon who brought the bread happened to bring a multigrain loaf. It was delicious and a little startling from the usual bread the church served. I noted that in my benediction saying, “Isn’t that truly the body of Christ?”