

“Building up one another in love”
A response to the Virginia Tech madness

April 22, 2007

Text: Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:15-16, 31-5:2; 5:8-9

I.

I didn't begin to learn of the horrific violence at Virginia Tech until Monday evening. As the news came in, gradually the magnitude of the rampage began to hit home. Along with the rest of the nation, I was stunned, shocked ...

32 innocent people, mostly young students, dead ... along with the 23 year-old killer who took his own life.

At first, the chaos and confusion of this sort of madness is too much. It overloads the system. Never are we prepared for the numbing news of violence on this scale. God forbid if any of us were to lose a loved one in such a rampage. The prospect sends shudders of biting horror down our spine.

When horror comes too close ... what do we do?

To begin with, we can't simply go through the motions of our lives as if nothing happened. As painful and hurtful as it is to deal—straight away—with this sort of evil, that's what we have to do.

Whatever response we have to the violence, it exists in a social context. As a society and a culture, any response takes shape through us. And as is always the case, we're the ones who are left to deal with the aftermath—with the consequences—of the mindless killing.

II.

And of course, we remember ...

1. In the late seventies, there was the mass suicide in Jonestown, down in Guyana ...
2. and there was the violent shooting spree in Austin, Texas (from a shooter in a tower) ...
3. and then, some years later, the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City (Timothy McVeigh) ...
4. and in 1999, Columbine High School (Longwood, Colorado) ...
5. and here recently the awful tragedy at the Amish school in Pennsylvania ...
6. and now Virginia Tech.

I don't know about you, but for me, every time, as I get drawn in to the dark realities of the violence—the social context, with all its variables ... along with the sheer evil that

has, tragically, become unleashed—in the days that follow ... trying to understand and find insight into the *why* and having compassion for the victims and their families, it becomes utterly exhausting.

For decades on end, we talk about the violence in American culture ... in the movies, the videos, the lyrics in the music, and of course in the video games that our youth culture plays and on and on.

What are we to do? When horror rises up in another human being (a child of Adam and Eve just like the rest of us) and that human person goes on a killing rampage.

III.

In the wake of such violent unfoldings, our response is on many levels.

First, we're absolutely numbed with sadness and sorrow for the innocent victims and their families. When we send our children off to college to pursue their education, we're proud and excited for them. Usually, these college years are some of the best of their lives. The last thing we expect is for our sons and daughters to be gunned down in a dorm or a classroom.

Thinking of the families, as we must ... it's too much ... thirty-two families (thirty-three, along with the shooter) ... their lives, now, in total upheaval, darkened by a deep sadness and sorrow that will live in them forever.

The consequences of tragedy, particularly of this sort, are so mind-boggling—so utterly senseless and mindless ... and seemingly so random. It just happened to be *that* college campus ... and *that* dorm ... *that* classroom.

And then we all (but particularly the victims' families) have to deal with the media onslaught that follows. Although no doubt meaning well, the media cannot help themselves, it seems, from going overboard ... from crossing over the thin line where tragedy turns into spectacle.

More than we can ever express, our hearts and our deepest sympathies and prayers go out to the families of the fallen.

IV.

Secondly, the killer. What more can be said? Clearly, a seriously mentally deranged young man ... somewhere between a psychotic paranoid and a deeply twisted psychopath.

Imagine the pain, to say nothing of the humiliation, of his family ... and the humiliation, as well, of the wider Korean community. They're an honor and shame culture.

Listening to his room mates and others who knew him, I don't recall ever hearing such grim a picture of a young human being in my life. The satanic fury that did battle in his spirit seems incomprehensible; and of course, ultimately it pushed him into a violent, calculated rage.

And thirdly, could Cho's rampage have been prevented? Tough, tough question. Maybe it could have. Certainly, the campus could have been shut down before the second rampage. But would it have prevented the well-armed Cho of a mass killing somewhere?

And what about the compiled information on Cho's mental state? From classmates and professors, and even trained psychologists ... where everyone came to a common conclusion. He was deeply troubled ... potentially violent. Still more, there's the nagging question, Why hadn't his family said more?

It's possible that in a free society such as ours, with all of our treasured constitutional freedoms ... it's possible that we simply can't absolutely prevent this sort of mindlessness from happening.

Always—to whatever extent—evil comes to us interwoven with good. It's part of our human situation.

V.

Still, two responses jump out at us. The first, of course, is related to gun control. Let's at least tell the truth about our gun laws. Simply put, they need to be stricter.

This is the deal; check it out! In any free society such as ours, sin is always going to be alive and well. It's a constant. There's always going to be a certain percentage of people out there who, if they have a gun in their hand, are going to use it to kill.

Whether it's anger, leading to rage, depression, paranoia, drugs, revenge, or any number of psychological disturbances, always—always—some measure of these people are going to be out there. That's a constant. There are deeply troubled people living among us.

What we have to do is minimize the possibilities of them being able to acquire arms of destruction and acting on their impulses.

In this area, our laws are tilted too strongly toward individual freedoms ... and not strongly enough toward responsibility.

We're a nation that cherishes our freedom, as we should. But freedom and responsibility go together. And gun control is an area where government, acting responsibly, needs to take action to help protect us from ourselves (which is one of the roles of government to begin with).

Clearly, our freedom to buy guns ought to be more restricted. For example: shouldn't it be more difficult to obtain a gun than to get a driver's license?

The second response that leaps out at us is the *mental health* role in our culture. As we can imagine, there's already been a lot of discussion on this. Informed people assure us that, for some time now, this has been a monumental problem across the country.

I refer to the number of people, a large portion of them young people, who have serious mental problems ... often times debilitating mental illnesses ... that are left unattended. There's simply no adequate means or process for dealing with it.

As a culture, we need to be as quick to respond to a mental illness concern as we are to a physical health concern. And the facilities and professional help need to be made available as well. Hopefully we'll see considerably more attention given to this in the months ahead.

VI.

Still, again, friends. What are we to do? As Christians, wanting in every way to be Christ's presence in the world; in the wake of this kind of madness, what are we to do?

At the end of the day, we can't control all the variables that relate to our human situation. But we can seek to *be Christ's presence in the world*. We can give ourselves to the Spirit and to love and simply hope for the best.

Listen to the Pauline prayer in **Ephesians**:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth ... and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

Then, later, in Ephesians 4, *speaking the truth in love ... growing up in every way into Christ ... with each of us working together ... building ourselves up in love.*

That's the KEY in all of life ... our individual life, family life, community life ... flowing over into our international life: ***building up one another in love.***

In the wider scope of things, friends, the best remedy for any brokenness in the human spirit is love.

In the long run, over the years and decades, there's no substitute for the healing and nurturing balm of love's blessing ... again, for doing whatever we can, whenever we can to **build up one another in love**.

Ephesians calls us to *be imitators of GOD ...living in love ... as Christ has loved us*.

VII.

As the Spirit leads us, friends, let us grieve for the dead, the fallen ...

- for those from whom the spark of life was mindlessly extinguished.
- And let us stand with their families, supporting them however we can ... with our prayers, our thoughts, and the way we live out our lives.

But let us have hearts of compassion, too, for the beleaguered and downtrodden in our midst.

- For the alienated and isolated ... and the mentally ill ...
- For those who each day experience a painful distance from God and from family.

For those beaten down by whatever oddity or weirdness ...

- those feeling ostracized and left out ...
- those who rise each day not knowing where to turn to find a place at the table ...
- those paralyzed by fear, every day, as the darkness of the night wears on ...

As people of faith, as the Bible prompts us and inspires us, it is for us to give our passion and our commitments to God's purposes ... **building up one another in love** ... *living in love* ... living as **Children of light** ... inviting all people in.

For love breeds hope ... just as it changes the human heart. *Feeding the lambs ... tending the sheep*.

May your grace and mercy come upon us, O God. Amen!

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