

For Community's Family of Faith In Response to the Tragedy at Virginia Tech

The tragic killings that ravaged the Virginia Tech community in Blacksburg, Virginia, this past Monday morning, April 16, have broken all our hearts. A crazed gunman randomly slew students and teachers in a bizarre paroxysm of hate, confusion, and shadowy impulses. By Monday evening the calamity that had unfolded shocked our nation's psyche and bruised our collective soul.

That we live in perilous times nearly goes without saying. But the shock we're feeling now and our sense of brokenness still cause excruciating pain. In this incident of school-related gun violence, there is the terrible sense of a tragic return, as we recall previous tragedies: Austin, Texas; Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Springfield, Oregon; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Littleton, Colorado.

Now, in response to the sorrow, we seek to find our way forward. As we proceed beyond the sadness of this week, I offer the following guiding suggestions:

(1) Pray. Pray for the families of the victims, that they will receive comfort, care, and the solace of treasured memories and cherished relationships. Pray for the entire collegial community at Virginia Tech, that they will eventually move through this valley of the shadow of death with purpose and new insights about life's meaning and its precious nature. Pray for the citizens in the town of Blacksburg, that they will feel the support of those outside their city limits who care deeply. Pray for the mercy-providing care-givers in congregations throughout the Blacksburg area, that they themselves will somehow know God's mercy in the midst of their endeavors.

(2) Grieve. Many tears have been shed since the news of the tragedy broke. And on this national day of mourning yet more tears will be cried by countless mourners. Mourning actions are always more than ritualistic enactments. Our tears are sure signs of our humanity. And like God, in whose image we have been created, our tears signal the sacred compassion that potentially lies at the foundation of every personality. So weep, cry, grieve. If you are having difficulty making sense of the tragedy, or you are in need of a shoulder to cry on or a listening ear in the midst of your grief, please feel free to call the church office and come and see any of the ministerial staff. Don't be hesitant to call upon us if your need of help in the grieving process happens some time after this week.

Each of us processes grief at a different pace and according to different rhythms.

(3) *Share Fellowship with Others.* Nearly every tragedy of conscious premeditation is born out of desperate isolation. In response to the killings at Virginia Tech, it has been heartening to witness the annealing sense of togetherness and mutual concern being shared by a community intent on not letting violence have the last word. Alongside the inspiring "Hokies" at Virginia Tech, and with the people of Blacksburg, indeed all of Virginia, we are in this together. We struggle with this current strife not as those who have no hope. And our hopefulness is found in the midst of fellowship shared in communities of care.

(4) *Revulsion and Anger are Natural.* Inevitably and naturally, revulsion at the events of this past Monday and expressions anger at the perpetrator have occurred and will occur. We need not fear these emotions. Anger is a natural and healthy emotional response to a violated value. But staying stuck in a morass of anger is not healthy. So be angry, yes, but begin to transform your anger, through reflection and resolve, into a commitment to show compassion to victims, to change the world where you are, and to join with others in new actions. The tears wrought from anger and revulsion can be transformative forces in maximizing the possibilities of preventing similar such tragedies in the future.

(5) *Make a New Friend in the Congregation.* The ultimate blossoms of a community are found in the friendships that develop there. So, let us cultivate communities where friendships flourish. Religious communities can be the sites of some of your most beautiful and caring friendships. Some of the deepest and most abiding relationships that you can experience happen in congregations. It is in a congregation where differences can be respected and honored. It is in congregations where individual talents can be appreciated and celebrated. Cliques never fare very well in congregations. Because we are an Easter people, there is the possibility of connections, community, and friendships for each one of us, no matter our status or condition in life. So, I invite you to grow a new friend at Community, and see how your life will flourish.

Love,

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(Also shared on Sunday, April 22, 2007 at the conclusion of the sermon “*No Great Acts of Love: Mother Teresa*”).