

Thousands of candles light the night during an April 17 vigil on the Virginia Tech University Drillfield for victims of the previous day's campus shooting spree that left 33 dead.



A Good Friday Orientation: Preaching in the Aftermath of Tragedy

By Reggie Tuck

On April 16, 2007, thirty-three lives were violently lost on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, where as I serve as a United Methodist pastor. That Monday was like most Mondays in Blacksburg, a small town built primarily around the university community. When the police first warned people to stay inside over a loudspeaker, I was with the mother of the one of the victims, discussing an outreach ministry. Neither of us had any idea of what was happening and neither of us could know what that day and the months following that day would bring. Indeed, we are still trying to comprehend what happened and still trying to discern how to live into the days ahead us.

There was much confusion in the aftermath of the shootings, as people attempted to respond to such unanticipated events while still in the midst of their own shock and disbelief. Accurate information was difficult to obtain, despite the deluge of news organizations present. There was an onslaught of generous and concerned people from around the nation offering services to the victims' families and first responders, but their well-intentioned offers only added to the confusion in those first few days, requiring local leaders to divide their energy between those directly affected by the tragedy and those wanting to come to Blacksburg and offer their services.

In the midst of the confusion, shock, and disbelief in the days following April 16, I adopted what I call a "Good Friday" orien-

tion to help frame my theological reflection and praxis. A Good Friday orientation avoids theological pronouncement, acknowledges the pain, and watches for the ways that God may still be at work. Just as the deriders of Jesus were quick to make theological pronouncements as he hung on the cross, there were many self-appointed theologians who rushed into Blacksburg, making pronouncements which seemed much too premature. From declarations that evil had descended upon our community to reassurances of Easter resurrection, the community was subjected to theological conclusions when the facts of what had happened were still being sorted out. It is pastorally more prudent and theologically more responsible to exercise great care in making theological pronouncements in the aftermath of such tragedies. A Good Friday orientation does not focus on conclusions or pat explanations, but rather acknowledges the deep sense of pain and disbelief as faithful expressions of trust in God.

The Sunday After Monday

The week was filled with memorial services, from the university convocation service to the funerals of local residents. Amidst the tears, I strived to be attentive to ways that God's grace was still at work in the midst of the pain, and drew on others' expressions of hope as my own congregation's first worship service after the event drew closer.

A UMNS photo courtesy of Virginia Tech University

Drawing from poet Nikki Giovanni's moving reflection at the university convocation, in which she declared, "We are Virginia Tech. We will prevail," I rephrased her refrain to declare "We are the people of Jesus Christ. We will prevail." I also drew inspiration from the father of Austin Cloyd, a nineteen year old student lost on April 16. A professor at the university, Dr. Cloyd sent an email to his students after he learned of his daughter's death, encouraging his students to cherish the sacredness of life and their loved ones. His words provided the conclusion of my sermon that Sunday, and allowed me to pose the question of where such faith comes from.

An article entitled "Probing the 'Meaning' of September 11, 2001" by Princeton Theological Seminary Professor William Stacy Johnson proved instructive for theological reflection and sermon construction.¹ Johnson, citing the work of Maurice Blanchot, writes "if the disaster could be said to have a 'meaning,' that would be the worst thing of all. The worst kind of 'wisdom' would be the kind that domesticates the devastation or seeks to explain it. By explaining events, we seek nothing more than to explain them away."

The text for that day was II Corinthians 4:7-9. Paul's words about being afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed served to acknowledge the ongoing experience of Good Friday in human life while also affirming that faith in Jesus Christ will prevail and enables us to prevail. God was proving to still be at work in spite of all the pain and the perplexity. The II Corinthians pericope enabled that reality to be recognized and affirmed without resorting to theological clichés and simplifications.

We were in a state of great shock and disbelief, not really knowing what to think or how to think. I began by suggesting that we not try to move from that place too quickly, and continued with four fundamental lessons of Christian faith that helped us as we struggled with the pain, confusion, and dismay, and that can help any community in times of crisis.

1. *This is a time to acknowledge our pain and not assign blame.* The actions of police and university officials had been scrutinized on national television throughout that week. There was insufficient knowledge for many of the conclusions, and many people in the congregational context knew that many such declarations were unwarranted. Pastoral responsibility demands that we acknowledge the very real pain of the moment, and advocate the need to wait until all the facts are known before attempting to construct an understanding.

2. *This is a time to affirm our larger oneness and not be divided by dumbness.* This observation seeks to address the need for mutual support, respect, and encouragement. In our case, identifying the killer as a Korean-American had given rise to anxiety of potential expressions of racial hostility. There was a profound sense of remorse and dismay in the Korean community, and we needed to express our larger solidarity as all people were hurting. On the Saturday following the incident, our church hosted a multicultural service which brought together the African American, Korean American, and European American communities to reaffirm our oneness and to reassure the Korean community of our support.

3. *This is a time to be kind and keep our minds.* It is important to emphasize the value of righteousness when the circumstance seems to give multiple opportunities for succumbing to the dark

side of human nature. There were a multiplicity of groups and individuals wanting to exploit the situation in ways that affirmed their agendas. Preferring kindness over justice, we must remind congregants of the need for emotional intelligence in responding to those who had descended upon our community as a consequence of the event.

4. *This is a time to renew our trust in what God can do, and believe that God will get us through.* It is possible to have hope in spite of the pain and the inability to understand. We can trust in God because of what God did on that first Good Friday. This final point of the sermon reflects the assurance that Paul offered the early Christian community when he wrote, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (I Thessalonians 4:13). Paul acknowledges that Christians will grieve; however, they grieve with hope and as Paul wrote in Romans 5:5 “hope does not disappoint us.”

A Way Forward

The task of addressing the tragedy at Virginia Tech did not end with the sermon on that first Sunday after the event. In the ensuing weeks, sermons continued to speak to issues of grief, compassion, and struggle. We eventually faced the question of whether we should continue to address the subject in sermons. There were some in the congregation who felt that we needed to move on while others weren't able to do so. Thus the first six months focused on themes related to the tragedy without always directly naming the event. We are still struggling to find our way forward.

There have been a number of experts who have come to the community to offer advice on matters related to the experience. It is my impression that such experts have wanted to extrapolate from other experiences what we should be doing and how we should be responding. Such guidance can indeed be helpful; however, each experience of such tragedy will be unique and each context will demand its own distinctive response. The same is true of the guidance I offer here. Your experience will not be the same as ours, and your response will carry its own nuance, but I urge you to approach crisis situations with a Good Friday orientation that avoids theological pronouncement, acknowledges the pain, and watches for the ways that God may still be perceived to be at work.

Too often in times of crisis, hasty attempts are made to construct theological models addressing the meaning of the event. On the contrary, it is my experience that we need to be patient with ourselves, with one another, and with God. □



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1 William Stacy Johnson, “Probing the ‘Meaning’ of September 11, 2001,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Volume XXIII, Number 1, p.42.