

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

August 6, 2019

January 25, 2014 was Columbia's introduction to random shootings in public places. Since that morning when two people were shot and killed in The Mall at Columbia, we have had to stop pretending that we are immune from the troubles of the world in this corner of Camelot.

As mass murders and acts of domestic terrorism continue week after week and month after month, this week we add El Paso and Dayton to the cities filled with innocent blood:



“A voice is heard in [El Paso and Dayton], mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15).

And as we contemplate these horrors and multiply our grief, we cry out with the psalmist, *“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”* (Psalm 11:3). I'd like to think with you about this briefly under the headings of guns, morals, and ministry.

Guns. I own guns. I like to shoot. But last week's killings remind me of the fact that the original weapons protected by the Second Amendment were almost entirely the ordinary hunting weapons ordinary citizens used to feed their families. The “assault rifles” being used in these killings and the huge magazines sometimes used by these killers have *no other purpose besides hunting humans*. Armed forces at war sometimes have such a need. Ordinary citizens do not.



I understand that all but a microscopic percentage of persons who own such guns will never do anything with them except target shoot (*they are generally forbidden for hunting animals* [!]). I understand that criminals will always have access to whatever weapons they have the money to buy. I get it.

But I see no reason why we should make it easy for these isolated jihadists and other irrational people to get access to weapons for hunting humans. We don't let ordinary citizens have surface-to-air missiles. We have to draw the line somewhere. I, at least, support the restriction of assault weapons to the military only.

And let us make no mistake. Whatever our nation does or does not do about guns and gun control, the source of our troubles is much deeper than weapons.

Morals. I have recently written in this column about “white privilege.” There is no doubt in my mind that as a white male in the United States, I have been and continue to be benefited by systems seen and unseen that have been designed precisely to privilege men who look like me. While I decry and despise such design, it is there nonetheless.

Because all of us are sinners, most of us have to wrestle with prejudices of one sort or another. Because all of us are sinners, we tend to compare ourselves with other people. And because all of us are sinners, we have a tendency to desire that some group of people be “farther down on the totem pole” than we are so that we can “look down” on them and feel better about ourselves as a result. Although making such comparisons and “looking down on”

are sinful and self-destructive, this is a very common—perhaps universal—human behavior, especially in our unredeemed state.

It seems to me that the need to “have someone to look down on” is more visceral the farther down the totem pole we find ourselves. And I suspect that this dynamic is a significant driver of “white nationalism,” which seems most attractive to white men whose social position is precarious.

Now in order to perceive ourselves as “superior” to certain others so that we can “look down” on them, it is necessary to devalue and dehumanize those “others.” And this “otherness” is also a crucial driver of the violence that plagues our land.

Perceiving persons who differ from us in language, national origin, skin color, gender, or in any other way as “other,” “not like us,” “not in my group,” and “not worth my respect” is a necessary criterion for hurting or killing them. Perceiving others as “other” rather than as “sister and brother” is a theological issue.

Psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan noted that **“We are all more human than otherwise,”** and we do well to remind ourselves often of this truth. God’s Word tells us that every human person has been created in the very image of God, and therefore every human person has *intrinsic* worth. God’s Word tells us that Jesus died to redeem every human person who will receive that redemption, and every human person therefore has *incalculable* worth.

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Because fewer and fewer persons in these United States are aware even to the slightest extent of these divine attributions of value, we as a people are becoming ever more morally adrift and unmoored from the most basic of biblical principles. As families disintegrate and fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military, we are losing any concept of personal sacrifice in the service of the Common Good.

Determining the sort of legislation that would help to make gun violence more difficult is not rocket science. But lawmakers don’t want to pass such legislation because if they did, they’d not be re-elected. And they wouldn’t be re-elected because ordinary Americans value what they perceive to be their/our “rights” over what is clearly the Common Good.

Isaiah put it well long ago when he wrote,

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?”

Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high”
(Isaiah 58:1-3).

And pastor William J. Barbour, II put it well recently when he wrote after the Mother Emmanuel murders in Charleston:

Many of South Carolina politicians and others in the nation are examples. They decry the killings but steadfastly refuse to support efforts to quell their divisive rhetoric and to cease their push for policies that promote race-based voter suppression. They refuse to vote for the Voting Rights Act. They cut funds for public education in ways that foster re-segregation. They deny workers living wages. They refuse Medicaid expansion. They proliferate guns. They use racialized code words to criticize the president, all in the name of taking “their” country back to “prevent its destruction.”

When will they own up to the fact that there is a history of racialized political rhetoric and policies that directly spawn the pathology of terroristic assassinations and carnages, and of violent resistance to constitutional decisions?

Ministry. I agree with Dr. Barbour’s statement, but I don’t think legislation, as important as it is, is the real solution to our problem. The real solution to violence of every kind is to be found in human hearts, transformed by the grace of God through personal relationship with Jesus, God’s Messiah, in the power of God’s Holy Spirit. And that, happily enough, is the province of the Church, the Body of Christ in the world. The real solution to last Saturday’s killings is for every one of us to become involved in meaningful ways in “pushing back the Darkness,” one life at a time.



Our repeated sorrows come from the reality that “the foundations are destroyed.” Marriages are founded less and less upon personal relationship with our Lord Christ . . . if couples trouble themselves to become married at all. Increasing numbers of children grow up without Christian parents . . . and many of them do not grow up with both parents.

Increasing numbers of us have no idea how to have a healthy, durable relationship. Examples are without number. Just listen to the conversations around you in public spaces (I expect that those conversations will mostly be people talking and arguing on the phone).

Yet even through all this pain, we can still say, with Jeremiah (after the destruction of Jerusalem), “*Because of the LORD’s faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! I say, ‘The LORD is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in him’*” (Lamentations 3:22-24).

And because our Hope is in God, it remains the case that there is probably nothing we can do, individually or together, that will make more difference in the world than to build relationships with youth and young adults and to love them to Jesus.

Only Jesus can remove anger from human hearts. Only Jesus can heal the wounds of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Only Jesus can fill the void in which all of us exist without His presence. Only Jesus can give us victory over the sin that lurks in every one of our minds. Only Jesus can give us a purpose for living that is sufficient for the highest and best that is

within us. And only as the sphere of Jesus' influence expands in our society will we be truly safe from the Darkness that stalks us.

If we don't want young men to be attracted to gangs, we need to be much more involved in doing what we can to see that they have fathers in their homes who are worthy role models of godly manhood and spiritual blessing. Achieving that goal will require some straight talk about sexual ethics, responsibility, and God's purposes for human life. Achieving that goal will require doing more to support young marriages as they attempt to cope with the increasingly difficult challenges of modern life.

If we don't want young people to be attracted to drugs, we need to be much more involved in providing alternative activities that offer pleasure and purpose. We need to be involved in supporting their schools and their schoolwork.

One Saturday evening, just a few hours after one of our shootings, I heard the story of a man who, some years ago, was playing the "ain't it awful" card in response to something in the news. His wife challenged him to do something about it, and he decided to become a mentor to a young man through his church, building his own life and character into the life of that youth, with wonderful effects in both of their lives.

While our hearts break for families in El Paso and Dayton, El Paso and Dayton are not our neighborhood. **Let's continue to take seriously God's call to us to be missionaries to the Village of Oakland Mills.**

Dave

