

ALL LIVES MATTER

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, July 10, 2016

This American life has been rocked by violence in the past week. As if the seemingly unnecessary deaths of two suspects in police custody weren't enough, a domestic terrorist opened fire upon unsuspecting law enforcement officers who were maintaining the peace at a protest in Dallas, Texas, killing five officers and wounding seven others. Before I conclude today, we will acknowledge the five officers who made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty and pray for their families. And we will pray for the American people.

Before I begin, "What have you been thinking and feeling about these tragic events?" Please don't just mimic media slogans, but if you're willing, summarize your honest thoughts and feelings in just a few words.

Have you been alarmed? Angry? Frightened? Confused? Hopeless? Helpless?

Let me remind you of the Good News: You have been created and loved by God, who has a glorious purpose for your life. That's not a promise that He will make you rich and famous, but that He listens to your sincere prayers and will sustain you in every circumstance, and make you a blessing to others, if you are willing and obedient.

All lives matter to God—regardless of skin color or ethnicity, regardless of handicaps or productivity. He sent His Son to rescue the rich, the poor, the slave, the free, the educated, the illiterate. God loves people!

I don't wish to minimize the fact that racism remains in the hearts of some people, nor that black-skinned people have suffered oppression and abuse in American society, more than others, since the founding of the union. At the same time, the disregard experienced by some does not warrant indiscriminate retribution against others. This is true for blacks and whites, and also for Christians and Muslims.

Is there really any difference at the heart level between fearing or prejudging one group of people by the color of their skin, or another by the color of their uniform?

It is appropriate for us to lament such circumstances as we have tasted in the past week, and to mourn the loss of lives and the grief of families. The events of last week were heartbreaking to me, and I'm not directly connected to either the people or the places involved. Hear the heart cry of David, the psalmist of ancient Israel:

Psalm 12:1 Help, O Lord, for the godly are fast disappearing! The faithful have vanished from the earth!

² Neighbors lie to each other, speaking with flattering lips and deceitful hearts.

³ May the Lord cut off their flattering lips and silence their boastful tongues.

⁴ They say, "We will lie to our hearts' content. Our lips are our own—who can stop us?"

⁵ The Lord replies, "I have seen violence done to the helpless, and I have heard the groans of the poor.

Now I will rise up to rescue them, as they have longed for me to do."

⁶ The Lord's promises are pure, like silver refined in a furnace, purified seven times over.

⁷ Therefore, Lord, we know you will protect the oppressed, preserving them forever from this lying generation, ⁸ even though the wicked strut about, and evil is praised throughout the land.

Do you think that David felt what many of us have felt this week? I'm sure he did.

Where shall we turn when human leaders fail us? When they behave corruptly?

Psalm 94:20 Can unjust leaders claim that God is on their side—leaders whose decrees permit injustice?

²¹ They gang up against the righteous and condemn the innocent to death.

²² But the Lord is my fortress; my God is the mighty rock where I hide.

²³ God will turn the sins of evil people back on them.

He will destroy them for their sins. The Lord our God will destroy them.

Haven't we a hope in God that He may overturn the works of darkness and turn things around to restore our joy?

Psalm 74:20 Remember your covenant promises, for the land is full of darkness and violence!

²¹ Don't let the downtrodden be humiliated again.

Instead, let the poor and needy praise your name.

ALL human life is precious in the sight of the God who can turn water into wine. No condition is so low that He cannot lift us up. Consider His warning to us in Christ's Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:21 "You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' ²² But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Can you see the Father's view of each of us? Each person is so treasured in His sight, that even our words and attitudes against them are prohibited. As a result we are responsible to govern our actions, our thoughts and feelings, and our words. If you allow yourself to speak evil of others in private, eventually, those evil words will spill out into the public (often, to our shame, through our own children). If you won't govern your tongue, don't ask others to do so.

We are members one of another, all a part of the one human race. We must respect God's sovereign purpose, even when we can't respect another's behavior. If you rush to judgment, it may turn out to be your own.

In fact, we are called to bear one another's burdens. The Amplified Bible makes this plain:

Galatians 6:2 Bear (endure, carry) one another's burdens and troublesome moral faults, and in this way fulfill and observe perfectly the law of Christ (the Messiah) and complete what is lacking [in your obedience to it].

³ For if any person thinks himself to be somebody [too important to condescend to shoulder another's load] when he is nobody [of superiority except in his own estimation], he deceives and deludes and cheats himself.

⁴ But let every person carefully scrutinize and examine and test his own conduct and his own work. He can then have the personal satisfaction and joy of doing something commendable [in itself alone] without [resorting to] boastful comparison with his neighbor.

God has provided for our peace in numerous ways. Most importantly, every individual may find peace with God when they shelter their soul in the care of Jesus Christ. Nothing compares to this peace of heart and mind!

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. ² Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁵ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

God has also provided for the peace and protection of any society or nation:

Romans 13:1 Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. ² So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. ³ For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.

⁴ *The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.* ⁵ *So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience.*

Yet, you and I have not been placed here or left here to make a name for ourselves, or to simply enjoy “the good life.” The Church of Jesus Christ has been called to be a light in the darkness, to offer a hope to the hopeless, to work for freedom of the oppressed, and comfort for the bereaved—to introduce God’s heavenly kingdom, even if we ourselves are part of those who are oppressed or bereaved. In every place and at every season, we are called to bear witness of Christ, of the Father’s heart of compassion and grace.

Philippians 3:20 *But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.* ²¹ *He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.*

God made us as emotional people, and He Himself has strong feelings about the world He has made, but He demonstrates enormous control over His emotions—over the timing, the intensity, and the objective of their expression. He will help you to do the same. If you rush to judgment, based on your strong feelings—perhaps fear or anger—you will inevitably judge inappropriately (too soon or too late, too harsh or too soft, or simply erroneously).

It is best to share your strong feelings with God in private prayer, and ask Him to channel them appropriately. You can express any feelings to God, but don’t mistake His compassionate ear for His approval. Examine yourself for self-righteousness, prejudice, hostility, pride, or indifference. Ask God to give you the heart and mind of Jesus, and to help you see others as He sees them.

Now, let’s take a few minutes to pray for the families of those officers who were killed in Dallas. They were:

- Lorne Ahrens, 48, a former semi-pro football player and 14-year veteran of the Dallas police.
- Michael Krol, a 40-year-old officer who joined the Dallas police in 2008.
- Michael Smith, former Army Ranger, 55-year-old father of two who liked to give stickers to the children at his church.
- Brent Thompson, a 43-year-old transit police officer.
- Patrick Zamarripa, a 32-year-old police officer who served three tours in Iraq.

And here are eight ways we can continue to pray for the law enforcement personnel in America:

Pray for their safety

Ask our heavenly Father to protect those who protect us. Ask him to stand guard over them as they watch over us. Pray on their behalf:

I run to you, Lord, for protection.

Don't disappoint me.

You do what is right, so come to my rescue.

Listen to my prayer and keep me safe.

(Psalms 71:1-2)

Pray for their peace

Pray that they may *"be anxious for nothing, and that the peace of God will guard their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 4:6-7)

Pray for their wisdom

Pray that they may not be *"wise in their own eyes,"* but that they will gain wisdom through fear of God (Proverbs 3:7).

Pray for those whom they may harm

As representatives of authority, police officers may be called to be *"agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer"* (Romans 13:4). Pray for those who the police may justly punish as well as those who, through error or evil, may be unjustly harmed by their actions.

Pray for those who may harm them

The enemies of the police are the enemies of society. But as with all enemies, we must pray for those who would do them harm (Matthew 5:43-45a).

Pray for their families

Pray for the spouses who lost their partner in life, the sons and daughters who lost their parent. Pray for every family member who lost loved ones in this tragedy. Mourn with them and pray that God will remind them of his promise to *"wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away"* (Revelation 21:4).

Pray for their salvation

Our Lord *"wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2:4). We should therefore express our desire that every law enforcement officer who does not yet know Jesus might be saved.

Pray for those the police protect

Say a prayer of thanksgiving for their sacrifice and pray also for the people the police dutifully protect and serve, that in this time of tragedy God will heal the brokenhearted in our nation and binds up their wounds (Psalm 147:3).

To help you remember them in these ways, I've prepared a card you may keep with your prayer notes, which the ushers will give you as you exit today.

Remember Jesus Christ who lived out the life we cannot live, bore in His own body the judgment for our sin, and was raised from the power of death.

And remember that the Gospel is the only word that can reconcile us to God and then to each other. It is our *real* hope.

To this end, I invite you to a prayer vigil at New Life Church in Novato, this evening at 6:00pm, to pray for our American people. I commented on Facebook this week that it seems like our world is in rapid regression—violent racial confrontations, like the 1970s, and Russia banning religious evangelism, like before 1991—how suddenly things can change! Of course, that works for changes to the good as well as changes to the bad.

I am convinced that the only hope for our nation is the prayer of a united Church. We must not sleep. We must not drift. We must mobilize our faith and act—through prayer and compassionate witness. This is nothing new, but it must become new in our day.

Rise up, church! Don't cower in fear. Don't be paralyzed by intimidation. Know whom you believe—Jesus, the Prince of Peace and King of Kings. Serve Him with your whole heart, with thoughtful abandon.

If not us, who? If not now, when?