



Dear members of Idlewild,

I have simply not been able to write a pastoral response to the tragedy in Las Vegas because it has simply been too big, too tragic, too unsettling for me to share any insights with you, because I simply have not had many insights to share. What is following, then, are just some remarks from a fellow struggler.

And I suppose they revolve around the question, **"WHAT THEN SHALL I DO?"**

1) We shall pray. I am a firm believer in what prayer can do. I say that because there have been times that I have been upheld by your prayers. I feel them. I am comforted by them. I am strengthened by them. *[Please read the prayer from the PDA linked below.]*

As one of you recently wrote, in times like these, we walk along a dangerous path, between the abyss of calloused cynicism on the one side and the abyss of despair on the other. Prayer for me provides hope, not in ourselves, or what we want God to do, but in the God who will continue to surprise and amaze us, as God did in the empty tomb.

Prayer also reminds me that I am not alone. I become less centered on the self (in the best of my prayers) and more centered on the creation that God gave us and called "good."

Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, shared yesterday that our Christian faith "involves a whisper from beyond time that death, while horrible, is not final—that the affirmations of the creeds and the inscriptions on tombstones are not lies. And for many," he concludes, "this hope is a barrier against despair."

2) But our prayers must not end with "amen." There have been many criticisms of the way politicians and others have cheapened the phrase "thoughts and prayers." It's easy to see why, for that phrase almost sounds profane in the midst of mumblings about "the price of freedom." However, we dare not throw the baby out with the bath water. And we must not use that phrase as an inoculation against responsibility or action.

Miroslav Volf, a survivor of the terrible civil wars in Serbia and Bosnia and a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, said recently that there is something deeply hypocritical about prayer for a problem that you are unwilling to help resolve.



"It's analogous to what is going on in the book of James 2:16," he said. "If a person says to those who are cold and hungry, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? Or if you look at the story of the Good Samaritan, we can easily imagine that the priest, who walked by a person robbed and left half-dead by the road, prayed as he was passing by. Still, he was a bad priest. The Samaritan was good because he did something to help the suffering person."

3) Thus, prayer leads to action. As a Christian, it is particularly painful for me to watch mass shooting after mass shooting after mass shooting be dismissed by Christian leaders saying that there is nothing we can do except arm ourselves more.

Mass shootings are not acts of God, nor are they natural disasters. And there is no way in our society that all of these acts could be prevented. However, if the shooter's first name was Mohammed, you can be assured that these same politicians would do everything they can to prevent future Mohammeds from opening fire on the masses.

Many of these are indeed preventable. We have seen what happened in Connecticut after the state expanded background checks and required handgun checks, gun crimes dropped by 40%. It goes without saying that no other country lives with this kind of madness. Other developed countries that are not beset by gun violence—such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom—are no less free than the United States. Each has had incidents of mass gun violence, but nowhere near our epidemic.

"WHAT KIND OF ACTION?" might you follow. That is up to you, guided by the Holy Spirit. But here are several suggestions:

- **Remember the good.** Mr. Rogers reminded his listeners about what his mother told him when bad things happened. "Remember the good people, the good things." And so we remember the first responders. In Houston and Florida and Puerto Rico, we remember the sacrifices people made on behalf of those who were suffering. We remember the many examples that surround us *every day* that remind us of God's vision for us ... for good.
- **Surround yourself with good people,** people with whom you can share your grief, your anger, your despair. In addition to praying over the past 48 hours, I made it a point to drop by the BASIC youth group gathering at Panera Bread on Tuesday morning (which they do every Tuesday at 6:30!) because I needed them. That same morning, I met with our program staff as we spent hours planning all the really good things that are in store for us at Idlewild.
- **Allow God to open our hearts.** As Margaret Burnett shared with us at our meeting on Tuesday, we have learned that it is possible for our brains to get re-trained so that we learn that such violence is *not* OK, and to train our brains ... and our hearts ... to think in terms of gratitude. God has made us to be a resilient people, but sometimes we simply need to claim that by sitting quietly, breathing, turn off the TV (and when it is on, be selective about what you watch!).
- **Be kind. Do something.** Hug your kids *every* night. Listen to those with whom you disagree. Really listen. You will find a common bond. Volunteer to feed our friends on Thursday evenings. Tutor. Write a letter to an elderly person. Find out how our new Children and Family Enrichment (CAFE) program is addressing some of these issues with children and parents. If you run out of ideas, please contact one of the clergy.
- **Finally, get involved politically.** Write your government officials. For those of you who are mothers, there is a wonderful group here in Memphis called momsdemandaction.com. As I hope I made clear, there is no single thing we can do to stop the madness. Evil does indeed exist, but we cannot buy into the lie that there is *nothing* we can do to "regulate evil." The entire history

of our government has been devoted to passing laws ... such as prohibiting assault, murder, and arson, as well as eradicating Jim Crow laws about segregation—surely evil ... in an attempt to prevent acts of evil.

So let us take a break from hate and strife and remember the victims and survivors and to recall our own fears and common vulnerability and humanity. Let us face the worst of it together by caring for them, wherever they may be, including those victims of violence in our own community.

Grief, it has been said, is the price of love. Let us remember to turn to the God who came among us and was weak and suffered among us, even endured death on a cross ... the God who once felt godforsaken, but eventually was able to summon joy amidst grief, and even life amidst death.

And I thank God that I am able to surround myself with you, fellow strugglers in the faith.

In solidarity,

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"A PRAYER AFTER THE MASSACRE IN LAS VEGAS"

by the Rev. Dr. Laurie Ann Kraus
Director, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance
October 2, 2017