

When I was the Presiding Bishop's Deputy for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, working out of our Church Center headquarters in New York, I used to attend Daily Morning Prayer in the Chapel with members of the staff. One day, we had just completed a weeks-long, course-reading of the Book of Ecclesiastes (which we had as our First Lesson today). This is Wisdom literature filled with rather depressing words like these:

"...it is an unhappy business that God has given human beings to be busy with...all is vanity and chasing after wind...I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it all to those who come after me...What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1) **Emptiness.**

The officiant that day was Brother James of the Brotherhood of St. Gregory who worked in the office of Anglican and Global Relations. When he finished the reading, he said, "The Word of the Lord. And thanks be to God that – in our lectionary – we do not have to hear from this bitter old man again for two years!"

Well, we all broke out into similar laughter, agreeing with what he said on that particular occasion. But I'm actually glad we have books and passages like this in the Bible -- because biblical literature is no "Pollyanna, keep-smiling-be-happy, fantasyland" account of human existence. The Bible is about the real world! Virtually every human emotion and life circumstance can be found somewhere in pages of the Bible.

And lots of it can be found in the 150 Psalms, like the one we had today: "For we see that the wise die also; like the dull and stupid they perish and leave their wealth to those who come after them. Their graves shall be their homes for ever, their dwelling places from generation to generation, though they call the lands after their own names." (Psalm 49:9-10) This is Reality Therapy, friends!

The one who wrote the Letter to the Colossians (our Second Lesson today) had no illusions about human nature. The list includes anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language and lying (among other things). If he was writing today, he

would also include the sins of racism and xenophobia which lead to mass shootings like the one yesterday in El Paso (it's too soon to know the cause of the one in Dayton) and he might also include the **cowardice** which keeps the U.S. Congress (and **all** of us, really) from doing something about it!

And then Jesus tells a story in the Gospel about a greedy landowner who could only think to build bigger and bigger barns to store his abundance rather than sharing them with those who might not have enough. He's not criticizing the man for his savings account in old age or making plans for the future, but for making the mistake of believing that he can save himself at the expense of others, taking advantage of his own "rights" at the expense of the rights of others.

No, the Bible doesn't flinch at taking a hard-eyed look at life – the good, the bad, and the ugly! What saves it from being a wholly negative set of documents is that the authors are always looking for God and God's presence **in the midst** of the tragedy and suffering of daily life! Even the Book of Ecclesiastes ends with these words, "Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come...Fear God and keep (the) commandments); for that is the whole duty of everyone." (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13)

The Psalmist begins his song with words like these: "Hear this, all your peoples; hearken, all you who dwell in the world, you of high degree and low, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak of wisdom, and my heart shall meditate on understanding." (Psalm 49:1-2)

The author of Colossians counsels us in the midst of pain and struggle to "...seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3) Keep an eternal perspective even in the midst of struggle in this broken world!

And Jesus also challenges us to keep our attention focused on God lest we end up like the selfish landowner who thought his many possessions would save him, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:21)

Scott Peck, the author of the pop-psychology text “The Road Less Traveled” so popular back in the 1980s began the book with these words, “Life is difficult!” Yes it is, and Christians – except for those deluded enough to follow the “prosperity gospel” – have never had any illusions about that! The question is, how do we survive...and thrive...in this difficult life?

The best spiritual director I ever had was a Franciscan sister named Mary Dingman. I would meet with her monthly and pour out my heart and soul with the joys and sorrows of being Bishop of Iowa... and a husband... and a father...and a son – all of which roles were more than challenging at times. But, in almost every situation, rather than engage in problem-solving or amateur psychology, Mary would simply ask, “So where is God in all this?”

She knew, as all good spiritual directors do, that her job was not to “fix” me or my problems, but help me identify and rely on the Presence of God who can be found in every circumstance life presents – if we have eyes to see. And that’s the one thing the Preacher of Ecclesiastes got wrong. Life is not all “Vanity” (emptiness). Life is **Presence**.

For God is present everywhere and in everything – even in the midst of tragedies like El Paso and Dayton, God is present in the courage of the first responders and medical personnel and the families of the victims. May God also be present in helping us not to give up the good fight for responsible gun control in this country and against the evil forces which keep this from happening.

If you’ve not seen the statement on all this issued by the clergy of our National Cathedral, even before these two most recent mass murders, I encourage you to do so. It’s a model of the kind of things we need to be saying and doing as church!

The spiritual disciplines and practices which Christians follow (and which I hope we can talk about in Spirit School after Community Hour today) – practices like prayer, reading the Bible, celebrating the Eucharist – are all simply ways of helping us pay attention to God. And to bring our minds and hearts back to God when they stray. Developing a Rule of Life for yourself, a pattern of how you will pray, read Scripture, come to church – these practices can bring your attention

back to God in the midst of real life, of the real problems and difficulties that life presents.

Because Christianity is about this life...every bit as much as the life to come. And God knows...we need to know that today.