

**Message: December 16, 2012. Advent 3 - Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Philippians 4: 4-9.**

**A reflection on the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut.**

**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Fifteen years ago, on a Sunday morning in August, news broke that Princess Diana had died in a car crash. I can't remember what I said in the sermon that day, but I do remember talking with one particularly distraught member of the congregation prior to the service. "I'm really angry with God right now" she said, choking her way through tears of grief and anger. "I have a hard time believing that Heaven could possibly be a 'better place' for Princess Di – she won't get to see her sons grow up, and those boys just lost their mother. I'd rather be with my kids, even if it meant giving up heaven."

My heart was similarly filled with strong emotion on Friday afternoon as information trickled out of Newtown, Connecticut, about the tragic killings at Sandy Hook elementary school. It sure didn't feel like someone else's story, it hit really close to home. Maybe it's because I was in a couple of lockdowns in my years at the school and could picture that horrific, chaotic situation all-too-clearly. Maybe it's the age of the perpetrator and his brother, who are exactly the same age as my kids. Maybe the killing of children is so tragic that it's impossible to maintain an emotional distance from it.

And to a much lesser extent, maybe it's because I was planning to preach about Joy today, on this Third Sunday of Advent, and joy is not a word that was close to my heart on Friday. Pain, Sorrow, Sadness, Grief, Anger, those emotion-words were all close at hand, but not joy. I'm not ready to let those emotions go quite yet, so I think I have **some additional Advent candles to light.**

Today in my heart, **I light a candle of pain:** the pain of acknowledging the reality of sin in our world. Sin is anything that alienates us from the love of God; Sin is the little choices that inch us away from God's will for our lives, or God's will for the world; Sin is the big actions in which we turn our back on God and intentionally choose something other. It's the actions lamented by the prophet Zephaniah in his day, as he spoke of God's ongoing faithfulness in spite of the nation's ongoing faithlessness. Sin is the gap between us and God, an indicator of our brokenness. When we see human lives ended by another, we see the destructiveness of Sin at its worst. And a candle of pain is lit.

Today in my heart, **I light a candle of sorrow:** a candle acknowledging that we are all diminished each time a life ends violently. Numerous modern theologians have put forth models about the interconnectedness of God's creation, but today I turn to Sallie McFague who (in her book *Life Abundant*) proposes for us an "Ecological Theology" which (p.33) "[gives] glory to God by loving the world; that understands its context to be the well-being of the planet and all its creatures... not a theology just for nature, but one for the entire cosmos with all its creatures, human and otherwise." I agree with her organic view of this world – each oil spill, each person living in poverty, each time that a life is ended arbitrarily, impacts not just those closest to the event, but the whole created order. Even if CNN didn't broadcast it into our homes, as earth-dwellers we are still impacted each time violence is enacted – anywhere, in any way. So as lives of schoolchildren and teachers are extinguished, a candle of sorrow is lit.

Today in my heart, **I light a candle of sadness.** My sadness relates to the number of people whose lives are tragically diminished by untreated or under-treated mental illness. I don't have it here to quote from it, but there's an eye-opening book by Terence Real called *I Don't Want to Talk About It* that quite correctly posits that a huge proportion of the adult male population in the USA and Canada suffer from Covert Depression. Unlike Overt Depression, which has symptoms we can see and deal with, Covert Depression is the sad, silent undercurrent that we just accept as part of what it is to be "a guy", incorrectly labelled by society as "being the strong silent type" or "not wearing his heart on his sleeve." So many men are just dying inside but have no emotional vocabulary to even name what's going on, and must live within the confines of societal prohibitions against men ever putting feelings into words. Left untreated, this covert depression erodes relationships, it encourages isolation, it can turn into xenophobia or rage or delusions. I don't pretend to know enough about the gunman's life to say much, but I can say this: every time a man resorts to violence I feel sad that so many of our boys and young men are trained to be strong, to keep it all in, to get over it and move forward. I know this to be absolutely contrary to the will of God, who has gifted us with a full range of emotions for good reason. And so a candle of sadness is lit.

Today in my heart, **I light a candle of grief.** In addition to any broader impacts of this event, it is devastating on the personal scale for the parents who have, in an instant, lost children who were only 6 or 7 years old. It is heartbreaking for the spouses and children of the school staff who were killed in their workplace. And in the spirit of Christ, who reminds us that our care is for all God's children, we bring to mind the family of the gunman, losing a 20-year-old and his mother and having a whole truckload of shame dropped on their family name. Twenty-eight lives end, just like that. And a candle of grief is lit.

Today in my heart, **I light a candle of anger.** Immediately after this news story broke on Friday, activists and lobbyists and commentators everywhere were railing once again for tighter gun control. While I stand shoulder to shoulder with them and their important plea, *that's* not the source of my anger.

My anger is about our society's unwillingness and inability to deal with strong emotion. Men may be somewhat more prone to this, but I think this one crosses gender boundaries: when we feel something uncomfortable, and feel it strongly, we will often seek an escape route. So frustration is treated by hurting someone else; despair is treated by getting wasted; loneliness is treated by the ingestion of pornography or over-ingestion of fatty foods; fear is treated by ganging up on someone; inadequacy is treated by shopping and shopping and shopping. Our reading from Philippians urges us to trust God with all of our material and emotional needs, but that's not the way of *our* world. Far too frequently, we don't stay in the midst of strong emotion and work it out, because that may involve suffering, and there's always an easier and more present alternative.

A week ago, my daughter Rita emailed me a YouTube link of Mister Rogers addressing the US Senate in 1969. He was arguing for the merits of Public Television, its ability to make a "meaningful expression of care" to children, and his personal desire to help children learn that their feelings are "mentionable and manageable." His devotion to the emotional needs of children, and his training as a Presbyterian minister are very evident as he makes his quiet but insistent plea. I'd like to read you his closing poem, which I've also posted to the Church blog, entitled, "What do you do with the Mad that you feel?"

What do you do with the mad that you feel  
When you feel so mad you could bite?  
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...  
And nothing you do seems very right?

What do you do? Do you punch a bag?  
Do you pound some clay or some dough?  
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?  
Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop  
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,  
And be able to do something else instead  
And think this song:

I can stop when I want to  
Can stop when I wish.  
I can stop, stop, stop any time.  
And what a good feeling to feel like this  
And know that the feeling is really mine.  
Know that there's something deep inside  
That helps us become what we can.  
For a girl can be someday a woman  
And a boy can be someday a man.

Those words were written in 1968, but in the subsequent 44 years not much of its lesson has been learned, and this week some girls and boys were denied the opportunity to become women and men. That makes *me* "so mad I could bite". So a candle of anger is lit.

In my own little world, then, I have these alternate candles of emotion, burning brightly: candles of Pain, Sorrow, Sadness, Grief, and Anger. But am I ready to embrace that candle of Joy?

If joy is understood as a super-duper form of happiness, well no, that's not a candle I'll be lighting today. But joy is not just an extension of happiness; joy is the abiding sense that God, the creator and life-force of the whole universe, is with you this moment and every moment of your life. Joy is that deep indwelling of God that assures you that there is a purpose and destination to life.

A Roman Catholic blogger named Paul Thigpen writes this about joy: “[in the past thirty years,] joy has rarely been far from me, because Jesus has remained close by. That's not to say that I haven't known considerable grief, sadness, and struggle. Nor could I even say that I've been happy most of that time. But I've known an abiding joy nonetheless. When Christian friends ask about the secret of that joy, I share with them two important lessons that have made all the difference: First, I've learned not to confuse joy with happiness; and second, I've discovered that if we want joy, we must abandon the pursuit of it, and go looking for God instead.”

His wonderful blog post goes on to say much more about Joy, but the thing that stands out for me is his understanding of God's presence in all of life – to him, joy is an aspect or indicator of a connectedness with God. I tried to keep that in mind when lighting my imaginary candles– for even in the shadow of terrible tragedy, I see the presence of God in each one of these emotions. God's divine companionship with us in all life's events and emotions is, to me, a source of great consolation on this day. In the sermon two weeks ago, I shared a Biblical interpretation from Rabbi Harold Kushner, that when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush and said that God's name was “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be” it could just as easily have been translated, “**my name is – I am with you**”. The very heart of God is presence – in all of life's circumstances, from the most joyous to the most devastating, God is there.

And so, on this day, I embrace Joy in this way: I take those other candles, of pain, sorrow, sadness, grief, and anger – and gather them together in that pink candle over there, into a candle that says, “at this moment, and always, God is with us, and that is good.” May the light of that flame, the light of God's ever-present, indwelling love, shine into every life that needs light on this day. Amen.

Works cited:

McFague, Sallie. *Life Abundant: rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001.

Real, Terence. *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*. New York: Fireside, 1997.

Rogers, Fred. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXEuEUQIP3Q>

Thigpen, Paul. <http://www.paulthigpen.com/theology/joy.html>

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Reading 1, Zephaniah 3:14-18 Responsorial Psalm, Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6 Gospel, Luke 3:10-18 Reading 2, Philipians 4:4-7. FREE Daily Readings Classes. We ask you, humbly, to help.Â 16 When that Day comes, the message for Jerusalem will be: Zion, have no fear, do not let your hands fall limp. 17 Yahweh your God is there with you, the warrior-Saviour. He will rejoice over you with happy song, he will renew you by his love, he will dance with shouts of joy for you, 18 as on a day of festival. I have taken away your misfortune, no longer need you bear the disgrace of it. Responsorial Psalm, Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6. 2 Look, he is the God of my salvation: I shall have faith and not be afraid, for Yahweh is my strength and my song, he has been my salvation.'