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WE HAVE BLOOD ON OUR HANDS

Any minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace, who does not struggle out loud this morning with what happened yesterday in Tuscon, fails his or her ordination vows; fails in his or her duty as a citizen of a country that is descending into a self-inflicted chaos; fails to call out without apology and without partisanship, our socially accepted and constantly nourished addiction to violence that erupted yesterday and took the lives of six people, including a federal judge, and gravely wounded congresswoman Gabriel Giffords.

Among the dead was a 76 year old pastor of the church of my youth, the Church of Christ, a nine year old student at a nearby elementary school, Congressman Gifford's 30 year old director of community outreach, and two women, both in their 70's who were members of the Congresswoman's staff. The congresswoman was holding an outdoor event she called "Congress on the Corner" where she would engage voters in an unscripted conversation about issues of the day. She had no security.

Gabby as she is called by her friends, is married to a shuttle astronaut, is a moderate Democrat who narrowly won re-election against a Tea Party candidate who made her support of health care reform an issue. She had been repeatedly threatened, and in March had the windows of her D.C. office smashed by so-called patriots who, are as we all know, mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.

When the story broke yesterday, I told my wife Shawn that I could guess the profile of the shooter, even his weapon of choice. He would be young, white, frustrated by some recent events in his life, and addicted to a hatred of his own government. He would be a devotee of Limbaugh, Beck, O'Reilly, and the legions of hate mongers who view politicians that they disagree with as the enemy. His weapon of choice would be a Glock nine millimeter semi-automatic pistol, with an extended clip, a weapon as easy to get in this country as a dozen eggs.

The shooter, who may not have acted alone, is 22 year old Jared Lee Loughner, who in a series of rambling videos and You-Tube posts has said among other things, “I can’t trust the current government,” and “you could call me a terrorist.”

How many preachers in Oklahoma City this morning are going to make the obvious connection to our own home grown terrorist, Timothy McVeigh. But we didn’t learn our lesson then and we haven’t learned it now, and apparently it doesn’t matter how many times people try to tell us that violence is a downward spiral, we don’t listen.

The response on the Right in this country will be to say all the right things about praying for the family, not overreacting (which we can surely expect from the NRA, who after all held a rally right after the Columbine Massacre), and all those people with blood on their hands will make certain that we know that this was a disturbed, crazy young man who acted alone.

That is a lie, a lie so pernicious and so self-deluded as to constitute a sin—(and I don’t use the word lightly). Any minister who doesn’t say it from his pulpit for fear that someone will accuse him of mixing politics and religion has chosen a strange profession, and has forfeited any last vestige of relevance.

Extremist elements in this country, sowing hatred and violent rhetoric and fully-funded by the David and Charles Koch’s of the world, the billionaire oilmen from Wichita who have almost single-handedly funded the Tea Party movement and then passed it off as a “grass roots” movement, will join in a great expression of sadness about what sometimes happens in this crazy world, and isn’t it a shame.

These people are not on the fringe of our country. They are part of a major political party, and in public and on their websites, they talk about “second amendment remedies.” They talk about issuing permits to hunt not only wolves, but Barack Obama. Or, in the case of Sarah Palin, they place bulls-eyes over the districts held by her Democratic enemies — a graphic that mysteriously disappeared from the Momma Grizzlie’s website this morning — as did her catchy little phrase, “don’t retreat, reload.” Too late Sarah. Too late.

During the hysteria over the health care debate, grown men spoke of Washington as having been taken over by dangerous outside forces determined to destroy it and our way of life – men and women who intended to steal the country, who claimed that America was now in the hands of occupiers who did not understand the Constitution and needed to be stopped before they come to take our homes.

An opponent of Gabriel Giffords invited people to help him remove Giffords from office by

joining him to shoot a fully loaded M-16 rifle. Kelly is a former Marine who served in Iraq and on his website is shown wearing military gear and holding his automatic weapon and promoting the event. When asked to comment on the shooting, a spokesman for Kelly said, “I don’t see the connection — this was just a deranged individual.”

At a recent rally for Congresswoman Giffords, a gun fell out of the pants of someone standing in the crowd. In Arizona, where Hispanics constitute a shadow economy that serves wealthy white retirees, anti-immigrant sentiment runs so high that the man who tried to kill Gabby Gifford rails at those who cannot speak English and who are illiterate, and who use improper grammar (all the while making grammatical mistakes of his own).

It was not surprising to me to learn that he had trouble at the community college he attended and had to be disciplined. I know students like Jared, and know what kind of world they are growing up in. I know how truncated are their critical thinking skills, and how they gorge themselves on a diet of Twitter vacuities and Manichean chatter — how they have been raised to see a world as Manichean, with good guys and evil doers and nothing in-between. They are the children of such rhetoric; that is the milk we have been feeding them, and this is the harvest.

“Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’”

I have to wonder sometimes why so many Tea Partiers claim to be such devout Christians. What do they think Jesus meant when he said we are to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us? What do they think it means that the gospel, which was called the Great Offense, was a stumbling block not because it was violent and exclusive, but because it was a feast freely shared with the Gentiles in the name of one who ate with tax collectors and sinners?

In every tragedy there arises unlikely heroes and the speaking of truth to power from places you would never expect. For me, the most amazing voice already to emerge from this horror is that of Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dubnik — a conservative 50 year veteran of law enforcement in Arizona who minced no words, like so many preachers will today.

If you had closed your eyes during the press conference last night and listened you might have thought you were listening to Amos, or Isaiah, or Micah, or Jeremiah — or Jesus. Or heaven forbid, Michael Moore. But then if you opened your eyes you would see the face of a man who is the furthest thing from a wild-eyed radical, or a mad prophet decrying the hypocrisies of our time. Sherriff Dupnik said it again and again — as if he was not about to lose his chance to be heard by the world — even though he knew he was supposed to be answering questions (how many died, how many were injured, do you have a suspect, can you tell us how close he was to his victims?). The Sheriff wanted to let the world know not just *what* happened,

but *why* it happened. He said,

When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government – the anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous. And unfortunately, Arizona I think has become the capital. We have become the Mecca for prejudice and bigotry.

He said that he thought it was time that as a country we did a little soul-searching. But will we? Will we put down the guns? Will we put down the gun metaphors? Will we stop talking to and about one another as if some are privileged, entitled, sanctified – the true patriots – while all others are a threat?

Will leaders of the Right who have embraced the Tea Party and benefited from them now denounce all forms of violence in political discourse? Will anyone on the Left who portrayed Bush as Hitler own up to their own participation in a climate of hatred? And when will we be allowed to have a real conversation in this country again about gun control?

Will our governor elect Mary Fallin, who stood on the balcony in Washington D.C. last spring during a hate-filled rally against those who dared to reform health care by trying to provide it to more people, and waved a “Do Not Tread on Me” flag while below her people were spitting on Congressman John Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement — will she say anything more than just how sad she is, how she prays for all those affected by this terrible tragedy? Will anyone in Oklahoma, which often brags that it will write a tougher law against illegal immigrants than Arizona, tell the truth about how and why this happened? Or will we go back to business as usual, which is a society dedicated to worshiping the god of whatever the market will bear, until we have become a banana republic?

My fear this morning is that fear itself will paralyze us. That no one will decide to take the risks that now surround being a public official in this country. That in the midst of overwhelming challenges that will require sacrifices from everyone, nobody will be willing to take a stand on anything that threatens powerful special interests who have been granted personhood by the Supreme Court, and who can now buy the Congress, and the judges, and all the propaganda they need to create a world that benefits them while destroying their political enemies.

Members of Congress reported 42 cases of threats of violence against them in the first three months of 2010, nearly three times the previous year, which was an increase over the year before. Nearly all dealt with the health care bill. Because the health care bill became the symbol for whether people, or corporations will run this country.

My prayers this morning go out to all those who died, and all those who lie in hospital beds this morning clinging to life. My prayers go out to those who are feeling helpless in the face of growing hatred and bigotry, and who may be thinking that we cannot save ourselves.

My prayers go out this morning to those who are without work, and without hope, and without any real advocates in the halls of power. My prayers go out to a nation shocked by its own capacity for mindless violence, but most of all, my prayers go out to something more intangible, but more important — because this will happen again.

My prayer is for this to be a turning point for this country, a moment to sober up and to stop the madness, a chance at truth, at fearless, bi-partisan, compassionate truth. Because the road we are on does not get us where we want to go. Our perversion of the Christian faith would make Jesus weep. Our complicity in the violence we witnessed yesterday is real, and if we are not courageous enough to say that we are lying in a bed that hatred made then we will *not* rise up, we will *not* walk into the light, we will *not* know what it means to say, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

And I give thanks for Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dubnik, who has spoken more honestly, and more eloquently, than most religious professionals I know. Maybe the Sheriff is a preacher in disguise. God has been known to do that sort of thing, and we have been known not to listen.

Time to listen. Time to listen. Way past time to listen . . .

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