

THE CURE FOR OUR NATION'S HEART PROBLEM

How on earth has it come to this? The horror of two more mass shootings begs that question, and others. What sense does it make to retaliate for an adverse employment decision by taking six, sacred, human lives? Why should innocent children die for an affront that happened years before they were even born? And what can Christianity bring to bear in the face of such horrifying, bald-faced evil?

The mind-boggling situation in which we find ourselves is not so mystifying if we look to the Bible. There we see the trajectory and pervasiveness of evil, beginning with the very first sin (Genesis 3). In the beginning, everything God created was good. Asserting his rightful authority as their Creator, He gave humans only one rule in order to maintain the beautiful equilibrium He established: do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17).

This restraint was given out of love, to sustain their life and his perfect order. But that was one restraint too many for Adam and Eve.

They rebelled against it, usurped God's authority, and did what they desired instead. The consequences were catastrophic, and we are living with them still (Genesis 3:16-24). As we see both in the Bible and in our daily news, this prideful pattern of refusing restraint has continued.

Instead of trusting the loving intentions of God and gratefully following in his life-giving way, people make themselves the highest authority and do what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). This never ends well, and often ends tragically.

While we may never know the entire errant path the perpetrators of the recent Nashville school and Louisville bank shootings took to their desperate, heinous deeds, they appear to have been trying to avenge personal offenses. This is nothing new, either. Just four chapters into the Bible, we see the first murder, a sin spawned of jealousy and anger, intended to settle a score.

This primordial law of revenge is one of the many dark distortions still infecting our world. But Jesus brought pure light to the world (John 8:12). He taught a radically new way of thinking and living, to inaugurate the Kingdom of God and ultimately reconcile everything that has gone awry through sin (Colossians 1:20).

For instance, Jesus said, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). This teaching is not about being passive under attacks such as war or mass murder; it is directly aimed at our human inclination to retaliate for personal slights.

Jesus lived out that teaching. Instead of avenging affronts to his honor or rights, Jesus was silent before his accusers, and prayed for his persecutors (Matthew 27:27–31; Luke 23:34). He taught us to freely forgive, as we have been forgiven (Matthew 18:21–22; Luke 11:4).

He modeled this love and selflessness all the way to the cross, to which He calls us as well: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

I can hear a "Yes, but..." rising in my own mind and perhaps in yours. That resistance is the very thing that is inhibiting the redemptive powerhouse of Jesus, whose healing light is the only proven antidote to the darkness of fear, loneliness, resentment, alienation, despair,

isolation, hopelessness, anger and shame that fuels today's violence and heartbreak.

The potent Holy Spirit power that raised Jesus from the dead resides in every believer (Ephesians 1:13). Believe it, and unleash it in your daily life to help build the beautiful Kingdom of God here and now -- one kind word, one faith-filled conversation, one freely forgiven offense, one selfless act at a time. As Jesus said, "You are the light of the world...let it shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14,16)

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux