

A Letter from Bishop Breidenthal August 6, 2019

Dear friends in Christ,

I communicated with you briefly after the Dayton shootings. I would like to reflect a little more now.

We are in a highly charged time, in which our first obligation as followers of Christ is to maintain community across division. Many of the congregations in Southern Ohio are a hard-won weekly gathering of people who disagree deeply on political issues. This is a precious spiritual achievement which should not be undervalued. We stick together because we have all known forgiveness and grace in Jesus. We don't often talk about that, but this is the glue that holds us together. Forgiveness and grace is what we have in common, it is where our unity is rooted, and when we go there we often find a way to reframe our differences and find a better way forward.

But when society as a whole is experiencing serious division, as is the case in our country and the world today, it is all the more imperative that we claim the unity-in-difference that we usually take for granted. How do we do this in the face of the national debate over gun violence? To do this requires at least two things: (1) Being clear about how our views on gun legislation are related to our own faith convictions, and (2) talking these things through with one another with the very parishioners we disagree with most.

The challenge here is to risk conversation about what matters most deeply to us personally and why. It is often very hard for us to talk about our own lives. Yet this conversation is of utmost importance, because it is the only way to arrive at a collective witness— a witness that is from the ground up and leaves no voice out. I am calling on all our congregations and faith communities in Southern Ohio to seek out occasions for conversation about gun violence, and to relate that conversation to personal faith and experience about Christ.

Such conversation must be respectful and non-judgmental. We meet as people of faith and uncertain faith, seeking in community to discern God's will. This is what it means to explore becoming beloved community. Our conversation at the local level, translated ultimately into conversation at the national level, is the only way to make our religion real. If we don't talk with each other about real things, one-on-one, the church becomes inert.

Having said that, I want to say something about where I am coming from, both as a fellow conversation-partner and as a bishop hoping to initiate dialogue in our congregations. Wherever we are coming from politically, we must address the scourge of mass murder in our land. The root cause of these murderous outbreaks is ideological – and this goes all the way back to Columbine. Our social compact continues to be deeply marred by the notion that targeted segments of the human race must be done away with, and when society as a whole rejects such ideologies, tolerant society as a whole becomes the target.

I take this also to be a fundamental attack on who we are as Episcopalians. We are a faith community in service to Jesus Christ, and through that an agent of service to all communities of good will, as well as to those who have cut themselves off from such community. We are about genuine conversation with each other and with others, because we believe Jesus calls us to this.

What does this mean for us as a diocese in practical terms? For me, it comes down to one thing. We must start to talk about the issue of gun legislation among ourselves, relating what we have to say about that to our own faith. Nothing much will be gained from us as a faith community unless we do this work. If this conversation could happen between now and our diocesan convention in November, I would be grateful.

In the mean time, let all who have died in this violence find peace in the arms of God.

Blessings,

+Tom Breidenthal