

The Road Less Traveled – October 6, 2017

It can leave a dedicated follower of Jesus mired in despair.

Monday morning we all awoke to the news that it had happened again, this time worse than ever. A 64-year-old man staying in a Las Vegas high-rise hotel busted out a window and opened fire on a crowd of people attending a concert across the street. By the time it was all over, it was the worst mass shooting in U.S. history. As of mid-week, 59 people had died and hundreds more were injured. But the impact of those few minutes goes much deeper than the count of the dead and injured. Families were forever changed in those minutes. Spouses became widowed. Children lost parents. Parents lost children. And those who survived were robbed of a sense of security, the confidence that they can live their lives without fear of falling victim to random madness.

For the rest of us, there is a lasting impact as well. There is a renewed sense of “if it could happen there, it could happen here.” My first thought was of my children – my daughter sitting in the stands along with thousands of others every Friday night; my son walking across a college campus on his way to class. I am fond of saying that I refuse to live in fear, but there is a reality here that is hard to shake.

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In the hours following the initial reports of the shooting, many of my colleagues took to social media to offer words of wisdom, or to simply say they were praying for the victims, for the people of Las Vegas and for our country. I did not. Frankly, I had no wisdom to offer. And though I prayed that morning, I had a hard time figuring out what to pray for. Pray for peace, for an end to senseless violence? I’ve been doing that, more and more it seems. And yet the violence continues. Pray, as I suggested in a sermon a few weeks ago, that God reveal to me how I can be an instrument of the peace for which we all long? I did that, but frankly I prayed with an increasing awareness of my smallness in the world in the face of overwhelming evil. Pray for the victims and their families? I did that as well, but as I prayed I found myself reflecting on how hollow those words would sound to me if I was mourning the loss of my wife or my child.

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It wasn’t until later that night that the answer was revealed to me. Melissa and I are a part of the Thursday evening Disciple Bible Study called *Invitation to Psalms*. It is, as you might guess, a comprehensive study of the 150 hymns/prayers that have put words to the deepest emotions of the faithful since ancient times. Our assignment this week was to pray certain Psalms in the morning and in the evening. So Melissa and I set aside our regular devotional and instead prayed the assigned Psalms together each night. Monday night’s reading from Psalm 14 hit hard.

You evildoers may humiliate the plans of those who suffer, but the Lord is their refuge.

That's when it hit me. The reason prayer becomes so difficult in the face of evil is because evil creates despair. It's hard to even envision a solution. It's hard to imagine things really changing. And it is easy to feel helpless, victimized. No doubt the Jews of the ancient world felt the same despair. No people in history have struggled so much simply trying to survive. But in that moment that the Psalmist cries out in despair, he is also reminded of God's ultimate promise – hope. That though the darkness may last for the night, the morning will still dawn, the sun piercing the darkness. Though evil may reign, it will not have the last word. Or to put it more simply, God wins. Love triumphs.

When will that victory occur? That is ultimately a question only God can answer. But in the meantime, we are called first and foremost to live in the hope. And by hope I don't mean the irrational longing for something that likely will not happen. But in the confident expectation that the seemingly impossible will. It's only as we pray for and embrace that hope that we can truly begin praying for God to use us to make the improbable a reality.

After all, it's hard – I dare say impossible – to build a future that you can't imagine.

See you Sunday.