

WE ARE COMMUNITY – OR ARE WE?

Rev. Glenn Johnson

Y'know, Rev. Dr. Christopher Mark Ayers is a lot of things. Many of them bring us great laughs...with him and at him. He kids and teases with the unabashed glee of a six-year-old telling potty jokes...and we love it. But I submit that one of his most endearing roles is as the shepherd of the Wedgewood Baptist flock. He's a protector, comforter, a constant caregiver for all of us. The most recent case in point for me was last Monday morning, when Chris called to say that he had just heard a "breaking news" item about a shooting on the Virginia Tech campus. (For those of you who do not know, our son, Dean, is a freshman at Virginia Tech).

After a dozen or so increasingly frantic tries, I reached Dean's cell phone. He was safely in his dorm room, and unhurt in any way. That was about 10:10 on Monday morning. He told me he had heard that someone had been shot in a dorm near his, and that there was at that time a disturbance in a classroom building across the Drill Field. We hung up, and I went back to the news on the internet, and the horrible unfolding of events began. There were reports of six deaths...then 15...and then 21. A professor was seen leaving a building with blood on his arm. The tragedy grew, and confusion reigned with no news even of how many shooters were on the loose, until finally it was reported that the gunfire had ended. And only after a time, excruciating for those who had loved ones there, did we learn that 32 innocent persons had been slain, and that a shooter had taken his own life.

The outpouring of expressions of loving concern for Dean and his safety that day and the next flooded over Donna and me. There were visits and calls and emails, literally by the hundreds. We heard from relatives, neighbors, former coworkers, soccer parents

and players, our church family, and from many of our fellows at work or just plain good friends. It was overwhelming to realize how many people were anxious about him and about us.

When we talked with him on Monday evening, he and some of his fraternity brothers and sisters (it's a coed group) had just returned from an unsuccessful trip to two hospitals to locate a member of his pledge class. She was not found. He told us that on the night before, she had talked with him about not having heard whether she had been voted into the fraternity that evening (he had already learned of his acceptance). He assured her that she would have been voted in and that she would get the good word soon. They walked together back to campus from the meeting, and his last memory was of her smiling at him at her dorm door, with thanks for his being supportive.

On Tuesday morning, he called his mother to say that her name had been released as one of the 33 dead. He was calm, and somewhat resigned to her death, because the fraternity had come to the realization on a long Monday night that there was no other likely explanation for her being missing. He told her that he planned to attend the convocation in Cassell Coliseum at 2 o'clock with his fraternity. On Tuesday night, we called him just as he was leaving the candlelight vigil on the Drill Field. He was weeping openly. I hoped it would be therapeutic for him.

Throughout that day and evening also, many more people called or sent messages of caring, and each one was special to both of us. Dean was getting scores of calls and messages...brief, but effective, long-distance hugs from relatives, friends and acquaintances, and even some from strangers who were simply aware of the situation. Dean's deacon had been in touch with him immediately on Monday, despite having a funeral for her uncle to worry about. Chris assured Dean in several calls that he would be available anytime Dean needed to talk, soon or later. The cumulative effect of all those assurances of caring was marvelous for each of us.

I wanted to share these thoughts today, partly to say thank you. Thank you for being who you are as community and as friends to our family.

It is also true that I was struck profoundly by watching the Convocation of Healing on Tuesday afternoon. Let me tell you about it briefly. If you finish listening before I finish talking, please wave your arms, and we'll negotiate something.

The gym was filled with students, faculty, staff and distinguished guests. Several thousand more filled overflow seats in the adjacent football stadium. Almost all the students were wearing Virginia Tech colors, on tee shirts, sweatshirts, hats, jackets...it was a striking sea of maroon and orange.

When Dr. Charles Steger, Virginia Tech president, came to the podium, the entire crowd stood as one and gave him a very, very long applause, in obvious appreciation of the difficulties he had faced with grace and gentility in the preceding 30 hours. He, and others, spoke of the Virginia Tech family, and of how they had supported each other and how that love and care would continue. They spoke proudly and confidently of the combined strength that would enable each one to get through their immense shared sorrow. The staff announced that grief counseling was being offered to students, parents, faculty, ...to all who needed or wanted it, for as long as the need continued. What wonderful affirmation and support was evinced.

The thought began to grow in my heart that we ought to celebrate all of our communities, all our connections, all of our support more than we do. And as I listened to the mantra of all who love that school, "We Are Hokie Nation," I was reminded that all people everywhere are Hokie Nation, whether they know it or not. In the same way, all people everywhere are Tarheel Nation, or Wahoo Nation, or Wildcat Nation, or Wolfpack Nation.

But it's much too confining to restrict that thought to extended college communities. To phrase it as a Buddhist would: We all inter-are. Divisions and separations among us are intensely artificial. We are one human family. We are all

interconnected. We have what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” I am you and you are me, and we are everyone else...but we don’t live as though we are aware of our interbeing.

In his book, *Being Peace*, Thich Nhat Hanh lists 14 Precepts to live by...sort of a Vietnamese Buddhist version of our culture’s Ten Commandments. Most of them even have a “Thou shalt not” flavor to them. I wanted to share them with you today, and thus they are offered at the end of this text. I hope you will see if they have value for you, perhaps along with the Old Testament’s Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus to love God with all your body, mind and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

But then.....then, as I developed these thoughts....a coincidence came to my attention. I learned that so far this year there have been 13 homicides in my hometown, Louisville, and there were 13 persons killed in Charlotte/Mecklenburg as of the latest crime statistics. In each town, a little more than a third as many persons have been killed as were murdered on the VT campus on Monday morning. As was true in Blacksburg, most of the 26 victims in Louisville and Charlotte were in the 17- to 24-year-old range, but almost exclusively they were poor, lower-class, black males.

In stark contrast to CBS’s and NBC’s showing of the beautiful Virginia Tech campus with well-spaced buildings clad in Hokie-stone, the backgrounds for news stories of those other deaths were – generally – battered apartment buildings, trash-littered alleys or shabby houses in severe disrepair. There were no mentions in those news reports of anyone’s helping the surviving families and friends with long-term counseling or of people reaching out to let the parents, loved ones and friends know they were being thought of and would be cared for.

In Louisville, there have been television interviews of elementary age children and young teens who talk excitedly with wide-open eyes about witnessing a shooting and about seeing their brother or cousin or neighbor lying in the street, bleeding and dying.

But there is no one visible in the background, waiting to hold those youngsters or help them sort things out.

Grieving parents in those circumstances often have trouble even finding the money to bury their children. No one begins a fund to help them in any way.

A released prison inmate, age 19, who was attending college and doing well in his class work, was shot in the head in an alley a few months ago. There were two short mentions of the shooting on inside pages of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* - one that it occurred and another that listed his name. It was reported that no address was known. That's all that was ever said. There were no hugs – literal or figurative – there were no offers of counseling, no flowers, no candlelight vigil, no convocation of healing, no hundreds of messages of caring to his family and acquaintances. That's how little an inner-city college student meant to the community.

Oh, granted, there is a huge difference in scale. Being massacred in a classroom building with 30 others and being shot in an alley alone are not the same. But still, what a person is at age 19 in today's America is very much a result of what class he was born into and what opportunities were provided in his childhood.

Over and over again this week, the news anchors lamented the lost potential of the Virginia Tech victims' lives. It is beyond imagining, but we must be as concerned about the lost potential of all murdered young people...and we must be aware of and work to limit the loss of potential among those who continue to live in abject surroundings. There are children in America who far too routinely lie on the floor at night as they hear gun shots on the streets outside their homes, numbed into no longer even wondering which bullet may hit them. We who are privileged have wrongfully deleted them from our awareness.

We have done so because America is greatly divided between haves and have-nots. We are an increasingly classist society. Senseless violence like that in Blacksburg brings one group to its knees; to the other group, sadly, it's part of their everyday lives.

Classism is not a racial divide, but is rather an economic one. Blacks clearly suffer more than whites from economic inequality and from opportunity disparity, but there are many whites who are trapped in the quicksand of poverty and lost hope. The disparaging term, “trailer park trash,” reveals as much about the classism of those who use it as it says about those to whom it refers. All too often, what we categorize too quickly as racial discrimination is really classism and gross economic and social injustice that has been swept under the rug of our awareness.

With shock on his face and in his eyes, as he swept his hand in a circle toward the lovely campus setting, one man said on TV this week, "This isn't supposed to happen. This is America."

No, I say to him, and to us, “this” is one part of America....a narrowly defined and profoundly privileged community. America can, and we must, do better. Our *community* must be understood to be much, much wider and to include all of our neighbors, as Jesus commanded. To repeat, we inter-are.

Whether in Blacksburg or in Louisville or in Charlotte...we should not ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for us. We are the community of all mankind.

Let’s live like that is a reality to each of us.

Precepts of the Order of Interbeing

Thich Nhat Hanh - *Being Peace*

First – Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

Second – Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

Third – Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.

Fourth – Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images, and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

Fifth – Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy and material resources with those who are in need.

Sixth – Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your anger and hatred and the nature of the persons who have caused your anger and hatred.

Seventh – Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

Eighth – Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

Ninth – Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

Tenth – Do not use your community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

Eleventh – Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

Twelfth – Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

Thirteenth – Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

Fourteenth – Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. Sexual expression should not take place without love and a long-term commitment. In sexual relationships, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new life into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new things.