

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

December 1, 2019- First Sunday of Advent

Beating Swords into Ploughshares

Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. ... he'll get the people ready for God.” – Luke 1:5-17

Recently, Therese and I took a week of holidays to visit my son and his partner Gillian (Slide), who moved to Pittsburgh this summer to start Ph.D. programs in that city. Sean is studying Engineering and Public Policy at Carnegie Mellon University, while Gill, is studying human genetics in the School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Needless to say, we are very proud of both of them.

Sean and Gill moved into a townhouse in a treelined neighbourhood of Pittsburgh named Squirrel Hill. If that neighbourhood sounds familiar to you, it may be because of something that happened at this building (Slide), the home of three Jewish congregations, just two blocks from where Sean and Gill live. Just over a year ago, on October 27, 2018, a gunman carrying an assault rifle and three handguns entered the synagogue building and opened fire. Shouting that “all Jews must die” he moved from room to room in the large building, shooting people wherever he could find them. By the time police apprehended the injured gunman, eleven people had been killed and at least six injured. Two developmentally delayed adult brothers had been the first to die. The dead also included an elderly couple and one of the rabbis. It is fortunate that many more people were not killed. There had been 75 in the building when the rampage started.



Later investigations revealed that this gunman, whom I will not dignify by repeating his name, was inflamed by the rhetoric of anti-immigration forces, including president Trump, that caravans of Central American refugees were “invading” the United States. The Tree of Life synagogue was part of an organization that supported refugees, and that influenced his choice of targets. But the gunman had long participated in anti-Semitic social media forums. Although he was clearly indirectly influenced by President Trump, he was not a fan because he thought Trump was surrounded and controlled by Jews, and was too tolerant of what he described as an “infestation” of Jewish people in the United States.

The gunman apparently considered himself a Christian: one of his posts proclaimed that “The Lord Jesus Christ has come in the flesh,” and in the same breath that “Jews are children of Satan,” quoting a passage from the Gospel According to John. The astonishing irony of that claim, of course, is that the Lord Jesus Christ came in Jewish flesh. Jesus was Jewish. He was born to Jewish parents, dedicated as an infant in the temple, attended synagogues regularly, studied Torah and the prophets and lived his whole life in the diverse and often conflicted milieu of first century Judaism. Jesus was involved in some tense relations with other Jewish people to be sure, but you have to think of that as a family fight, not Jesus against all Jews; it would be like quoting Jean Chretien against the Liberals, or Ross against the Smillies. It makes absolutely no sense to invoke the name of Jesus to justify hate against Jews. The fact that it makes no sense, however, does not prevent people from doing it. And it didn’t prevent this horrible person from carrying out this horrible crime.

How does a community respond to such a traumatically violent event? What you can’t do is just shrug and say, “It happens.” To do nothing, in the face of such horrible violence, is to excuse and allow and treat it as normal. But it is not normal; it is not excusable, and it must not be passed over. The violence of such a tragedy must be challenged and rejected in order to establish peace and justice. In the language of the prophets Isaiah and Micah, how do you take the swords and spears of violence and turn them into something else? How do you respond to violence and trauma in ways that beat the swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks?

The people of Squirrel Hill and the people of Pittsburgh did a pretty good job, from what I could see, and they are still doing a good job. (slide) Immediately after the attack, people started bringing flowers and leaving them on the sidewalk by the synagogue. (slide) The Jewish community placed markers, naming each of the dead, and they became the focus of commemoration.



(slide) A few nights later, there was a large public vigil in the neighbourhood business centre, outside the large Presbyterian church there.

(slide) Pittsburgh locals made Stars of David and hung them along the Murray Avenue.

(slide) The President showed up, but was met by protestors shouted “Words Matter!” to remind us all that when you use violent language to manipulate public opinion, you can’t wash your hands of violent consequences.

(slide) On the Friday following the attack, the Pittsburgh daily newspaper published the first few words of the Jewish mourners prayer called the Kaddish, in Hebrew, on the front page.

(Slide) When we arrived in Squirrel Hill nearly thirteen months after that horrific crime, virtually every street had yellow signs claiming that this neighborhood, so scarred by this atrocity, was “no place for hate.” (Slide) Other signs proclaimed in Hebrew, English and Arabic, that “No matter where you are from, we’re glad you’re our neighbour.” (Slide) Most businesses had a similar sign either on an electronic board or behind glass. You may recognize in the left hand image a portion of the logo for the Pittsburgh Steelers football team. The one on the right, has eleven candles, one for each of those killed.



(Slide) Across the street from the synagogue, a school had put up a sign proclaiming, “We’re Glad You’re Our Neighbour,” (Slide) and a Catholic church put up a sign reaffirming the fundamental Christian commandment: “Love Thy Neighbor – No Exceptions.”

(Slide) Artists also found ways to express their determination that their community not be defined by hate, but by its opposite. The print on the left by a professional artist was in the window of a framing store, and the sidewalk chalk art was outside the Tree of Life Synagogue.

(Slide) Sean and Gill, I was pleased to note, had intentionally placed a welcome mat outside their front door as their contribution to the general community effort.

(Slide) At one point, we walked by another synagogue, spoke briefly with the security guards who were highly visible outside the front door, and noticed this sign, in which the Jewish community expresses its gratitude for the community support they are receiving.

The three synagogues that shared the Tree of Life building, as you can imagine were the most severely traumatized by the attacks. They put up chain link fences around the perimeter of the property, presumably to restrict access for better

security. They covered those fences with blue tarps to further reduce the exposure of their congregation, but after a few months decided that they could do better than blue tarps. (Slide) So they started a #HeartsTogether project. According to their website:



(Slide) **#HeartsTogether: The Art of Rebuilding** is a neighborhood beautification project and a way for our congregations —Tree of Life, New Light and Dor Hadash—to say thank you to those who showed us so much love and support in the aftermath of the October 27, 2018 massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue building. In transforming the site of the tragedy into one of beauty, the congregations intend to project outward the strength and positivity that the neighborhood, the city and the world shared with us during our darkest days. These healing and uplifting works of art are meant to reflect and honor the loving, joyful lives of our eleven victims and bring light back to the corner of Wilkins and Shady avenue.



(Slide) 224 young artists from around the United States submitted art works on the theme of healing, support and community solidarity. Of those, 108, including this one, came from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where a scant eight months earlier, a different gunman carrying a similar assault rifle killed seventeen and injured seventeen more. Art works also came from Littleton Colorado, where thirteen were killed at Columbine High School, and Newton, Connecticut, where 28 were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. There was a real sense of solidarity in this response to violence, that gave strength in both directions.



Figure 1 Figure 1 - "Together We Stand," Kayla A., 15 - Marjorie Stoneman Douglas School, Parkland, FL

(Slide) 101 of these art works were silk screened onto windscreens that cover the chain link fence around the property. I spent a half hour looking at these art works and contemplating how this community, supported by these young artists, had changed a place of unspeakable horror and tragedy into one of hope, beauty and love. If you are interested in seeing more of these art works, every one of them is on the #HeartsTogether website.

(Slide) This is one of my favorites, also from a student at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas School in Florida. The message is “A Champion is defined not by their wins, but by how they recover when they fall.”



Figure 2 - by Maria F., 16, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL

This morning, we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent, the season of hope in which we both remember the ways in which God entered into human life nearly two thousand years ago, and look forward to the ways in which God is still at work in our world today. We look for signs of peace in the midst of violence, signs of justice springing up where there is oppression, and signs of joy in the midst of sadness and despair. This Advent, let's cultivate hope, that just as the angel revealed good news to Zechariah so long ago, messengers of hope, peace, justice and love are still appearing, still beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, so that one day each of us may live without fear. Amen.