

Just Sit with It

Sermon by the Rev. William Tully, St. Bartholomew's Church, New York, January 16, 2011

Yesterday, one week to the day after it was the scene of a bloody shooting, the Safeway supermarket at North Oracle Road and East Ina Road in Tuscon reopened for business. Across town, at the Pima County Fairgrounds, a sprawling gun show opened.

Life begs for normalcy.

During just one week, funerals have been conducted for the six people who died in the shooting. Several others have been released from hospital. We eagerly await twice daily medical updates on Representative Gabrielle Giffords. The news cycle, editorial comment and blogging have been almost completely focused on the shooting and what it means.

President Obama, like several of his predecessors, put his heart into the task of comforting the nation and he began to suggest some ways to find deeper meaning in the event.

That's a lot for one week. A lot.

There is religious precedent and spiritual wisdom for paying this kind of immediate and intense attention.

Our Jewish friends teach us that a burial of the dead and funeral or memorial service happen as quickly as possible. Then comes "sitting *shiva*"—a weeklong period of mourning. By tradition, the mourners stay home and receive visitors and by further tradition, no greetings are exchanged and visitors wait for the mourners to initiate conversation. The mourner is under no obligation to engage in conversation and may, in fact, completely ignore his/her visitors.

America and its non-stop voices could learn something from this practice.

The idea is to *sit*. Food may be brought and friends may quietly assist with serving, even cleaning the house so that the mourners can simply sit.

If you were given a chance to pull back and sit, what would happen in your mind? Where would it go? What tools, traditions, or beliefs do you bring to the sort of week America has had? If you yourself are mourning in a more direct way, what are you reaching for? When life hands you a loss or setback—or, for that matter, something really good—what are your inner resources?

As I said, it's completely understandable that the Safeway in Tuscon has reopened and that people need and want to get on with their lives. But, again, tradition has some wisdom for us.

At the end of *shiva*, "seven" in the Hebrew, a thirty day period called *shloshim* begins. In this period, the mourners themselves do not go to festive meals, or enter into marriage, and men do not shave or get haircuts. By popular custom, friends and acquaintances can do *mitzvot*, good deeds, that will benefit the dead. A special privilege is to learn the Torah, often by creating a group "bible study."

Obviously different cultures have their own traditions, and there are things we have in common, or even imitate, from one another—wakes, visitations, bringing food.

Isn't this the kind of passage that requires more than a cease-fire in the war of words, as welcome has that felt for a few days?

Isn't this in fact a call—to America, to the intentionally religious, maybe even to you?

The reading today is a call story, in which Peter and Andrew, originally disciples of John, were with him one day when Jesus appeared. Encountering him, they found their own calling and followed him.

This story in John requires a little decoding. It's a late New Testament story, a recollection, an answer to the question, How did our movement begin? Why did people begin to follow Jesus?

The decoding is to take that phrase John uses, "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and know that what we hear as poetry set to routinely gorgeous music was really crisis talk. The 'lamb of God' was the one who was sacrificed. Jesus was that good man, a very good man, the 'Son of Man,' that is 'child of humanity,' whose very good life of teaching, compassion and healing was betrayed and cut short.

That was a crisis, and a crisis is a crossroads, a moment of unavoidable choice. A long tradition among us in the Christian way is that whenever one meets Jesus, there is a crisis: What am I to make of this man and his story? How might it change my life? And for all of us, what have we been careless about, to our peril?

Arizona, like Ground Zero on 9/11; or Dealey Plaza in Dallas in 1963 where JFK was shot; or the Loraine Motel in Memphis where Dr. King was shot in 1968 —yes, now Arizona has become our crisis.

From the perspective of our story, our tradition, it may be a "lamb of God" moment.

Its question is, *will you sit shiva?* Then, will you take 30 more days and study, perhaps side by side with others? Will you even take a year to reflect, to ask yourself whether you have for yourself, for your children, for others you care about, a perspective and a practice that allows you and them to keep their heads, open their hearts and hold their fire?

The crisis of Jesus as lamb of God was not that an angry God demanded blood sacrifice. That line is preached and taught, but I have to say it's an anxious misreading of the crisis, formed by those who would rather spew words than to sit *shiva* and really think.

It's always possible that God can and will use this moment, this latest crisis, to bring us to a non-sacrificial understanding. It's not God who is the monster demanding recompense. The monster is humanity. It's us.

Sit shiva, my friends. Do the good deed of learning. A class begins today. In a few weeks, I'll offer an annual look at these big questions. Every week someone stands here to teach. Every week people come to sit with us and study scripture.

We don't live in a safe or perfect world, and all our good deeds will not perfect it. But if you learn to use moments like this, there is a chance that fewer children will grow up lost or angry, that those who are not of sound mind will get the help they need.

It will happen when we are honest enough to sit, not shout. Sit to find out what's inside.

The good news, the great news, is that when you do, you'll find God there.