



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

A Sermon in Response to the Aurora Tragedy of February 15, 2019

February 17, 2019

In light of the tragedy that has befallen us this weekend, I've put aside the sermon I had prepared for today to reflect on the situation of the last two days. Even so, words seem so trite in the face of such a tragedy, for little can be said that comforts in disaster. So my words today are reflections more than insight, for I don't have much insight into the darkness of evil such as we have seen this weekend. But we cannot turn our back and hide, for we are people who proclaim that the light of the world penetrates the darkness with love, and we are compelled to be part of the light.

It is impossible to comprehend what the families of this violence are feeling and the loss they have sustained. Words fail us and all we can do is wrap our arms around the survivors and cry with them.

I remember the words of Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood fame when he was asked about tragedies such as this. He said: look for the helpers. That's good advice, I think, and as I watched with immense sadness the television coverage on Friday evening, I realized that we must begin with Police Chief Kristen Ziman, a member of this congregation. She had organized and rehearsed the police force for such emergencies, so when called upon to enact them, they were ready. She and the Aurora Police Department received many accolades from newscasters and people around the community for having such a fine-tuned and well-practiced team in order to respond to the calls just four minutes after the first one came through.

And then to be so poised and calm, so articulate and controlled at the press conferences she and the mayor had to attend, one can only stand in admiration and appreciation for representing Aurora so well in the face of an unfolding tragedy.

Then we think about those people who were the first responders, who were willing to go toward the bullets rather than run away from them. Among them was our own Jeff Wiencek, Bob Jones, and Chris Tunney who were some of the first to enter the building. Two of the first officers into the building were shot, and fellow officers carried them to waiting ambulances to go to hospital trauma centers. Then those officers turned around and went back into the building to confront the shooter. One has to admire the ability to think clearly enough to care for colleagues first and then put oneself in danger to go toward the bullets and not away from them. And one can only imagine what was going on in the minds and hearts of the families of the police officers as well as the families of the employees as they heard the news.

When the trauma was over, the officers had to go to the staging area at Aurora University where families of Pratt employees waited to hear of the news of their loved ones. Again, one can't imagine what it would be like to have to read the names of the deceased, and what it might have been like to hear the screams and see family members collapse upon hearing their loved one's name. It must have felt like a bullet to them, making it all the more difficult for the officers whose duty it was to carry out this task.

We are told that there were upwards of 300 responders in this situation, from local police officers to the FBI and the ATF, and a myriad other people trained for such emergencies. Grateful for their selfless service in the face of danger, we honor and thank them. It is a sad commentary on our nation and our world that such is the case.

The community is still stunned. I reflected several times as I was watching the news that I'd watched before as other communities suffered such tragic mass shootings, and while there was a deep sense of tragedy, it was at a distance. But when it becomes personal and in one's own back yard, it's a different matter. Waves of guilt flooded my conscience for not responding this way to previous tragedies.

And I think about the survivor guilt that those employees who didn't die must feel. Grateful to be alive they are, but there will be remorse for having survived as they think of the families who are grieving the loss of those who perished. We must keep these people in our prayers as much as we do those who lost loved ones.

And these families of those five people killed, of course, are the ones who are foremost on our minds and hearts. Those who died just thought they were going to work, and would be home as usual. But not so on Friday, which is hard to get one's mind around it. And we can't even begin to imagine what it's like to walk in the shoes of those whose loved ones died, all of whom were young and had families and who will never be the same.

As people of faith we come searching for a response and answers. But there are no answers. These are the situations that challenge our belief systems, and right they should, for all too often our belief systems don't stand the test of such tragedies. Suffice it to say that all we can do is trust the living and the dead into the keeping of God, and then spend our lives caring and loving and including and giving.

We are not people of answers but people of faith, and the best thing we can do is surround the community, and particularly the families and the responders with our love and support, knowing we can't change or explain the situation. We realize it could just as easily have been us while shopping for groceries, or at the theater, or a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade.

We must continue to live by faith that our living has some purpose; that we are entrusted with the lives of the people around us. We must continue to live by faith even when we can't see our way through the maze of violence and senseless murders. We must continue to be a community that believes love overcomes fear. We must continue to believe that walking side by side through the darkness of such events makes the community stronger, and ourselves be willing, like first responders, to walk toward the darkness and not away from it.

Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen wrote a little book entitled *The Wounded Healer*. The image is helpful, I think, as we go forward. There is no healer like one who has been wounded and survived. Survivors are stronger for their tragedy, and can, if they are willing to let their wounds be reminders of their own pain, feel the pain of others who are wounded. We are wounded healers, touching the pain of this weekend and finding in it strength to make the world a better place through love and kindness. This is the central message of the Christian faith that the man Jesus, who sought to love people unconditionally, and bring hope to the hopeless, and bring into the mainstream those whom society marginalizes, was convicted of a trumped up crime and murdered, became the light of the world, the joy that undergirds even the saddest of days, and the wounded healer that inspires us to do the same. Amen.

Gary L. McCann

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

God of hope and peace, we come before you today humbled and numbed by the tragedy that has befallen our community this weekend. The world is a violent and scary place. We humans pride ourselves on being civil and rational, but we need only be confronted by situations such as we have known today to realize we are prone to violence in its ugliest forms.

Give us faith to continue to be people of hope and love. Give us courage to respond to tragedy in faithful and creative ways so we can be part of the stability of the world. It is easy to blame and to find scapegoats to explain why bad things happen to good people, but in the end, we have no recourse but to go on living by faith and be lovers and not haters.

Guide us through the coming days, that as a community of Aurora and as a community of faith we can hold in our arms and in our prayers these people who have been traumatized and who have suffered loss that we will never know. Give us peace that we may be peacemakers; instill within us a sense of hope that we may instill hope in others. May we use our resources—whether physical, emotional, financial, or psychological—to help those who cannot help themselves.

We pray particularly today for those families who are grieving the loss of loved ones. We remember those parents, and those spouses, and those children whose lives have been torn apart by death in this shooting. We also think of people who have lost loved ones apart from this tragic situation, but whose loss is just as keen and whose lives are just as empty without the one who has taken from them.

Fill us not with platitudes but with love. May we not defer our actions to make the world a more loving place to you, but take up the challenge to do what we can to keep people safe, and allay their fears, and know that they are loved by you because they are loved by us.

Send us into a new week with a renewed sense of community, not weighed down by the events to the point that we are stifled in our work, but at the same time never forgetting. Love us with a holy love that we may be lover without condition and joyful even in the darkness. In the name of the Christ of peace, Amen.