

## “Christmas Unvarnished”

I was putting the finishing touches on my fun, funny, short (!) homily  
for this morning,  
The one with the title “Who Wants to be the Shepherd?” that is printed  
There in the order of service,  
When my wife called from a lunch she was at to tell me to turn on the news  
– NOW!! –  
Because of the story coming out of CT.  
Like many of you with small (or maybe not so small) children,  
Karen and I were so sorely tempted to run off to the school down our street  
And pick up our 9 and 12yr. old and just hold them in our arms  
There in the parking lot,  
just bathe them and even smother them with our hugs and kisses,  
Because the first response of parents is protection and safety,  
Which we learn the instant we first hold our babies when they are babies.  
Right parents?

And because I know we have some our children here with us this morning,  
I also appreciate the response from our 12-year-old  
when he finally walked in the door,  
Who after tight, suffocating hugs from mom and dad, said:  
*‘enough already! Jeez.’*  
Right kids?

Then I heard President Obama through the radio,  
and when I heard him describe  
The loss of those little kids to gun violence,  
and I heard him pause and pause and pause,  
Knowing that he was fighting against the tears that wanted to come  
streaming down his face,  
because he is a parent first, president second,  
And when I heard him quote that famous psalm to us at the end  
– *Psalm 147, vs. 3* –  
That asks us and asks God, if we believe in God,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
And bind up our wounds,  
I knew some different words were needed for today,  
Because the varnish was off, the light was shadowed,  
And in times like these what we need most of all from our  
Faith communities and our religious leaders , I believe,  
is to stand up and speak for the soul,  
because who else will? Who else will?  
So for those of you for whom titles matter, this is the title now, the new one:  
*“Christmas Unvarnished. Music Sunday Unvarnished. Love Unvarnished.”*

First, it’s worth saying that in times of loss and tragedy –  
big, public ones like on Friday, and small, more personal and even private  
ones

Like the memorial service we held here yesterday –  
That nothing is balm for the soul like the balm of music.

Am I right?

And this is because music -  
like cool water that rushes across cracked, dry earth,  
has a way of splashing over the cracks in us, the wounds in us,  
nourishing the spring ,  
*you might say nourishing the spirit, inside.*

So here this morning a wish for all of us to simply let yourself  
Continue to be washed and healed and blessed and even baptized by our  
choir

And our music today,  
*baptized* I word I use intentionally because  
It means to cleanse, to wash, to make clean,  
Which are things I know I need, and you may feel yourself needing, too,  
Because living in this world can make us so smudged,  
So scuffed, so...shall I say it? I will...  
So dirtied.

Which leads directly to this new sermon title I have – *Christmas  
Unvarnished, Love Unvarnished, Music Sunday Unvarnished,*  
Or in other words: What does it mean for us to celebrate  
These oh so polished holidays in a world that is decidedly not?  
Will you permit me to share some biblical history?  
Even if you shake your heads ‘no,’ I will share it anyway.

The biblical history is this - that even though Christmas has become  
For us *a sentimental, candy-cane sticky-to-touch,*  
*warm peppermint tea by the fire*

Kind of holiday,

The gospels remind us that Jesus was born into a brutal world –

A world where the local King, King Herod, ordered all babies under the age of 2

To die because he was afraid of this new prophesied king,

A world where this so-called king was born not at Mass General

Or a lovely birthing center, but in hay, in poverty, animals all around,

To a mother who in today's world would be the equivalent of

An immigrant woman without a green card,

Walking from Motel 6 to Motel 6 on Rt. 9 looking for a handout.

That we are meant – we the Christian or the Jew or atheist or agnostic or skeptic

Or pick your label, please –

That we are meant to read these old stories in December and learn

About what this Rabbi Jesus said about love and compassion

breaking into this brutal world says something, I think,

About these holidays and about us,

Not least of which is even when cruelty and hate and

Senseless violence occur,

Love still arrives, love still arrives,

Yes, love still arrives.

But that isn't really my point – my point isn't for us to see

How those old stories are relevant for us today. Another sermon.

Another Sunday.

My point is that here we have the choir and Joe singing to us

This beautiful music in German that, when we read  
The English, is telling us “*Unto Us A Child is Born*”  
While here in mid-December  
we have hearts and souls that are breaking open  
For our friends in CT who have lost their babies.  
How can we sing “Joy to the World” one week from tomorrow  
When there is so much pain?  
How can we sing “Silent Night, O Holy night?” when not 2 and a half  
Hours away the night is pierced with tears and crying and unspeakable loss?  
How can we hold up our candles and bring light into this sometimes darkly  
Deep world?

And very simply, my answer is this:

Because we must.

Because the world needs something of what we have to give.

And, as I told our children earlier,

What we have to give are 3 things that our souls shout

From our congregation this morning.

Are we ready to review? (credit Meg Riley):

- 1) *Our souls are interconnected*, which is to say that our faith teaches us  
*that we belong to one human family,*  
*and when and one part of this family is torn all of us are torn,*  
*when one grieves we all grieve,*  
*when one is comforted, we all are in some measure comfort.*

Given this interconnection, this is week is a good time to reach people  
you have been thinking of since Friday,

To reach out to people you may know who have been touched by violence,  
Physical or emotional,  
And tell them you care how your soul touches there.

2) *Our souls are created to love, not fear; created to hope, not despair.*

It can sound like a platitude, can't it? Something that ministers are supposed

To say, that pulpits are supposed to preach.

But please hear me when I tell you that I have been at the bedside of despair,

I have seen fear - I know the taste, the sounds, the colors –

And because I have witnessed you,

because I have a front-row seat to your lives

and your redemptions and your recoveries and your hopes...

Because of all this I can, as your witness,

tell you that love is indeed stronger than death,

And hope is greater than fear.

The media will get its viewers with fear.

The politicians will get their votes with their punditry and promises.

But meanwhile, each day, and especially every Sunday,

Our faith and your ministers will say centered in the power of love.

3) *The purpose of our lives, (to quote the great Unitarian minister A Powell Davies), especially in times like these, is to grow a soul.*

What does a growing soul look like?

How about joy that may seem strange to some?

How about we sing our hearts out (which I will ask us to do in a second).

How about we cherish relationships that aren't perfect.

How about we look people in the eye.

How about we give whole chunks of ourselves away.

How about we ask someone who is on the other side of the debates

That inevitably will come: "Tell me more about that..."

And how about we can listen, and listen, and listen.

Will this growth in soul meet the depth of need?

Will this interconnection, this love, this growth in my soul

And your soul be strong enough to resist the shadows

Of all that is dividing, fearing, and destroyed in our time?

Is it enough to say: I do not know?

But I can tell you what I promise..

And it is good that our children are here with this morning,

Because today I make this promise especially to them:

I, Nathan, along with Rebecca Parker and Isaiah and all the religious leaders

old and new, including Stephanie and Robin here in our congregation,

Promise that there will be religious witness.

On behalf of the adults in this room I promise

That we will be the people who will bear witness against unnecessary

Destruction,

That we will not avoid seeing what must be seen of sorrow and outrage,

Tenderness and wonder.

I also personally promise to use my role as your minister,  
And a minister of this faith,  
To join others in seeking reasonable, timely, and much needed gun control,  
So that those who shouldn't have guns, don't, and those who would  
Do us harm, can't.

And as I seek to live that promise I promise to speak of refreshed worlds  
And invite all of us to be ourselves without fear,  
To invite us to go to work and school and lunch and play-dates and church  
Without feeling threatened or afraid.

And I promise, we promise you, our children,  
To come together in times of need, in times of unvarnished holidays  
And holy days to help you draw strength from these old wells  
Of faith and scripture and pews and pulpit and music and song  
To renew our souls, to help us heal, and transform and bless life,  
And be, in the end, people who stand on the side of love.

This I promise, this we promise.

Because if not us, then who?

And if not now, then when?

Stand with me, friends, and sing some healing into this room  
With our choir – “*Angels we have heard on high*” (#\_\_\_\_\_).