

October 7/8, 2017
Rev. Scott Shreve

“Words of Freedom-In the Interest of Others”

St. Paul UMC, Omaha
Philippians 2:1-13

Please hear the seminal words in our letter lesson written by Paul to the Christians living in a city which is located in modern day Greece. Paul writes, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

The attitude that Paul lifts up is embraced by many people around the world; some religious and some not, some Christian and some of other faith traditions. We celebrate the goodness, selflessness, and kindness of so many people with whom we share this planet. The words of Paul are ideals that we strive to evidence in our lives as claim the name Christian. Oftentimes we see people heroically look to the interests of others, at their own peril, in the midst of atrocities perpetrated by an individual or a group who only look to their own interest.

Have you been following the latest wave of brutality against the estimated 1.1 million stateless Rohingya who live, precariously, in Myanmar’s Rakhine state? The Rohingya are one of the world’s most persecuted minorities. They are Muslims in a nation dominated by Buddhists. The Rohingya claim they are indigenous, and many are descended from settlers who came to Burma in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1982 the then military government of Burma stripped them of their citizenship. They are now considered illegal immigrants in Myanmar (Burma) as well as in neighboring Bangladesh, where many have fled.

Five years ago clashes between Buddhist and Muslim communities left hundreds dead, most Rohingya. With their mosques and villages torched, 120,000 Rohingya were forced into camps in Myanmar. This year the Burmese military unleashed a campaign of terror that has included executions, mass detentions, razing of villages, and systematic rape, according to the United Nations and human rights organizations. The army onslaught, which began after an attack on border posts by suspected Rohingya militants left nine policemen dead, triggered an exodus of over 400,000 Rohingya into crowded refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh.

One young refugee recounted that she and her family escaped to a wooded area when the Burmese army entered their village. Before the soldiers left they set fire to the harvest-ready rice fields, looted houses, and shot or stole all the cattle and goats. She said they did not want to come to the refugee camp but they had no choice as the “army has only one aim: to get rid of all Rohingya.” The army’s actions has been seen as ethnic cleansing by international bodies.

This is life for Rohingya, a people most of us have never heard of because they live on the other side of the world. Let us take a moment out to pray for the suffering of the Rohingya people.

Paul’s words to the Philippians and the attitude he lifts up have fallen on deaf ears by those who strip the Rohingya of their homes and basic dignity.

Paul’s words are foundational for living in the midst of diversity. “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Because the atrocities perpetrated against Rohingya are happening on the other side of the globe most of us have known little or nothing about it. Yet, we all know of the atrocity that unfolded in Las Vegas this past Sunday evening. At least 58 people were killed and over 500 wounded by a rogue gunman who showered bullets onto the grounds of a country music concert across the street from the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

The shooter broke out windows from his hotel room on the 32nd floor that overlooked the crowd that was attending the last evening of a three-day country music concert. Historically, this tragic event in Las Vegas has overtaken the now second deadliest mass shooting in the U.S., which was 2016’s deadly rampage at the Pulse

nightclub in Orlando, which left 49 dead. Three of the top four deadliest mass shootings in the United States were committed in the past five years, and the majority took place at soft targets, including restaurants, schools, and churches.

Unfortunately, this is part of our life in America now. Let us take a moment out for prayer for those who lost loved ones in Las Vegas, for those recovering, and our nation as we come to grips with yet another mass shooting.

Paul's words to the Philippians are not embraced by deranged individuals that senselessly kill scores of people. Paul's words are basic guidelines for the most of us living in the United States. "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

In fact, both in Myanmar and Las Vegas, we find countless examples of people living with the "interests of others" uppermost in their actions. There are many representatives from the United Nations and various human rights organizations hearing the stories and tending to the needs of the Rohingya in refugee camps in Bangladesh. These are individuals and groups that dedicate themselves to caring for the interests of others in the most desperate places in the world. They live the attitude that Paul lifts up in his letter to the Philippians in a heroic fashion.

That same heroic attitude was seen in Las Vegas this past Sunday in the midst of the shooting rampage. There were numerous reports of one person covering another person to protect her from the bullets. Many covering others were hit and are now among those in critical condition receiving hospital care. We saw the video of people placing strangers who had been hit by bullets on sections of barrier fencing and carrying them to vehicles to be transported to hospitals. Cars, trucks, and SUV's owned by ordinary citizens turned into ambulances. The individuals carrying the wounded to safety were doing this in the midst of the bullets raining down around them. Many were former or active military, medical personnel, or first responders who were off-duty and attendees at the concert.

Talk about heroic action, how about the police force and their response? In the midst of total chaos they determined the location of the shooter, rushed to his room, and brought an end to the shooting and further death and injuries.

Did you read about the timeline of response by the Las Vegas police?

At 10:05 p.m. the first shots were fired

- 10:12 Officers reach 31st floor with report gunfire coming from the floor above
- 10:15 Last shots fired into the concert crowd
- 10:18 Security guard on 32nd floor tells police he has been shot and points them to room
- 11:20 Swat teams enter gunman's room. They find the gunman had taken his own life.

Only ten minutes elapsed from the first shots fired to locating the shooter and the last shot being fired. It must have seemed like an eternity but that was a quick response time. That is heroic action in the midst of chaos.

Yes, atrocities in Myanmar and Las Vegas and so many other places around the world happen nearly every week. Each atrocity that comes to our attention is disconcerting. I don't know about you but when I read about hundreds of thousands of lives being brutalized in Myanmar or see the hundreds of lives being lost or gravely injured in a mass shooting in America I have my breath taken away. I feel immobilized. What are we to do?

Then I read the words of Paul to the Philippians. He wrote this letter to the Philippians while he was imprisoned. He was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. He did not know what his fate would be. Many other Christians at that time had been crucified, burnt to death, or even thrown to the lions in the Coliseum by the Roman authorities. He knows the Christians in Philippi had experienced various forms of persecution.

In response Paul pens these words. “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Then he reminds them of their example and inspiration as they look to the interest of others at all times and in all circumstances.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God, as something to
be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form
of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient
to the point of death— even death on a cross.

What did God do when God witnessed atrocities and chaos among humanity on earth?

Paul tells us that God emptied God’s self of the divine nature so God might be fully present with humankind and our chaos. In fact, looking to the interest of the whole of humanity this self-emptying God, who we know as Jesus, fully exposed himself to the worse this world has to offer, “even death on a cross.”

Jesus repeatedly “looked to the interest of others” throughout his ministry; teaching to provide guidance, healing wounds and diseases of body, mind and soul, shared words of compassion and forgiveness to the downtrodden, and provided expressions of love to the outcast.

What is our response to atrocities, cruelty, and chaos? In the midst of our bewilderment, anger, and grief we are called to respond with love that has the interests of others first and foremost in our minds and actions. This is the divine response to humanity and it is be our response as disciples of Christ. Amen.