

We have had a difficult week, as a country. I had planned for today's service to be joyous and celebrative, but after this week's tragedy in Uvalde, Texas, I could not come here and celebrate. Instead, I am mourning, and I am angry. Because as unspeakably tragic, predictable, and preventable as this week's shooting was, it's sadly one of many such tragedies in recent weeks, months, years, and now decades. In addition to these mass events, there's the persistent drip of violence in our cities and communities that may not strike us as heinous but is equally destructive. How long must this go on? What will it take for us to admit that what we are doing is wrong and needs to change? Notice I said, "we." What **we** are doing is wrong and needs to change. I'm not pointing the finger at other people saying they are the problem. We are the problem, and the only way out is if we admit our problem and our need to change. I have three things I want to say to you today: an invitation, a reminder, and an appeal. First, the invitation: I invite you to the vulnerability of lament.

In the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction in 586BC, many parents lost their children to violence, something no parent should ever go through. Amid the rubble, when there were plenty of fingers to point and reasons for blame, the book of Lamentations was written to give voice to grief in the context of faith:

My eyes are worn out from weeping; my stomach is churning. My insides are poured on the ground because the daughter of my people is shattered, because children and babies are fainting in the city streets... How can I comfort you, young woman Daughter Zion? Your hurt is as vast as the sea. Who can heal you?

When tragedy comes, we don't need to be cheered up, nor told how to feel. We don't need to hear how God is in control and good will come from this. The most human thing we can do when we encounter tragedy is to lament and to hold space for others to lament. Lament is the practice of giving voice to our grief, and it is one of the most vulnerable and healing things we can do. It's a gift we give to ourselves, putting language to our feelings, no matter how painful they may be.

There is a phrase I've been hearing more frequently the last couple years: toxic positivity. Are you familiar with this phrase? Toxic positivity is the belief that one should maintain a positive mindset, no matter the situation. The Bible is not a book of toxic positivity. Large portions of scripture are lament, which means lament is not an indication of a lack of faith. In fact, it's the opposite. Lament is an expression of deep faith that takes courage and vulnerability. When we lament we take our place in the long line of those who've gone before us and suffered loss. We take our place in the community of grief. Pádraig Ó Tuama is a poet and theologian who grew up in the troubles of Ireland and has worked as a peacemaker between Protestants and Catholics. He has a poem, "The Pedagogy of Conflict," which is a beautiful example of lament. He writes:

When I was a child,
I learned to count to five
one, two, three, four, five.
but these days, I've been counting lives, so I count

one life
one life
one life
one life
one life

because each time
is the first time
that that life
has been taken.

You are invited to lament.

The second thing I want to say to you today is a reminder that we belong to one another. In John 17, Jesus is praying for you, and he is praying for me, and he is praying for us. He says: "I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us." Jesus prays that our unity would mirror Jesus' own unity with God. Now, this may sound like wishful thinking. Do you feel unified with the "other side" these days, however you define that phrase? Whenever gun violence erupts, we all go to our respective corners and point the finger at those in the other corner and say, "You are the problem!" And instead of seeing others as having difference of opinions, we see them as demons. And this can and must stop.

We are not the only country that has gone down a road of sectarianism. For more than thirty years, Northern Ireland had a sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants that appeared intractable, until the Good Friday Agreement was signed on April 10, 1998. Though this did not put an end to all violence and hatred, for the past 24 years, this agreement has achieved what many said was impossible. Cecelia Clegg and Joe Liechty wrote an incredible book entitled *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, from which we can learn a lot. They define sectarianism as "belonging gone bad," and they outline an eleven-point scale of sectarianism which begins with, "We are different." There's no problem there, but then it moves to, "We are right." Thirdly, "We are right, and you are wrong." Fourth, "You are a less adequate version of what we are." The scale continues to escalate until it gets to, "You are evil" and finally, "You are demonic." Once you get to that point, violence is inevitable, even justified. After all, if you are a demon, it's only right to get rid of you.

How often do we hear or think this about those with whom we disagree? It's not just that we have disagreements, but those with whom I disagree are evil, even demonic. This kind of rhetoric is on the rise, and as followers of Christ, it's up to us to interrupt this escalation of sectarianism and learn to see the other through Christ's eyes that with all our differences, we still belong to one another. However intractable our differences may be, peace is still possible, but only if we refuse to diminish other people's humanity and continually remind ourselves that we belong to one another, even those you don't understand and do not like.

Jesus prays that we would be one, and I'll let you in on a little secret: Jesus' prayers are always answered. Whether he prays, "Father forgive them, they know not what they

do,” or he prays may they be one, Jesus’ prayers are always answered, which means when you look into the eyes of your enemy, you look upon someone who is forgiven by God and is one with you, as Jesus is one with the Father. You see, unity is not something we do. It’s something God has done for us. God became one with us in Christ. Though we demonized him, he forgave us, loved us, made himself one with us. That’s the gospel. So, take a moment and look around this sanctuary, and you will see people with whom you agree, and those with whom you disagree. You will see people with whom you share the same values and others who have different values. Every person you see is someone to whom you belong, and they belong to you. Whoever you look upon in this church, community and around the world, that’s what you see, someone forgiven by God and who belongs to you. The end is unity and belonging. That’s where we’re headed, so let’s begin there. Your unity with other people is not dependent on your feelings about them, nor on your ability to agree. Our unity is grounded in Christ became one with us and makes us one, which means we belong to one another for better for worse.

The third thing I want to say to you is an appeal to hope. Hope is not a luxury, nor is it optional. Jane Goodale calls hope a survival mechanism, and it is to be distinguished from optimism. Optimism is toxic positivity, a thin call to cheer up. I don’t want to be cheered up. I’m grieving. I’m grieving over who and what’s we’ve lost. I grieve over our stubborn unwillingness to change or listen to one another. I grieve and I grieve, but I will not let go of hope. I refuse to believe that things cannot be better or that our past determines our future. Things have not always been this way, which means they need not remain this way. Hope is neither cheery, nor thin. Hope is a defiant posture of the soul that says despite what I see around me, we shall overcome. Jesus says he’s given us the glory God gave to him, so that we can be one. We can be. We shall be. I will not give up hope because Jesus’ prayers are always answered.

In a moment we will sing, *We Shall Overcome*, and most of us associate that song with the Civil Rights movement. But this spiritual most likely dates from the days of the slave trade and may have been a work song aboard slave ships. If people working the plantations held onto hope that we shall overcome, we’ll walk hand in hand, we shall live in peace, we are not afraid, and God will see us through, then what right do you or I have in giving up hope? We grieve with one another. We belong to each other, and we hold onto hope, because tomorrow need not look like today. We shall overcome, because we belong to God, and God will see us through.