

249 Monterey Park

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Monterey Park", originally shared on January 26, 2023. It was the 249th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Are you blessed? You may think so, but when you read today's telling of what Jesus calls "blessed" it might make your hair stand on end! And it will give you a clue for how to process the horrific violence we saw last Sunday in Monterey Park, where I have been temporarily serving very part-time in retirement since last June.

We had an earthquake last Tuesday night. It seemed an appropriate expression of the upheaval we felt in Monterey Park last Sunday.

I started doing "supply preaching" after I retired, leading worship and preaching at area churches when they needed someone to fill-in for their pastor or were between pastors. I served several Sundays at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Monterey Park.

They asked if I could come every Sunday plus 6 hours during the week in the Spring of 2022, to help them emerge from the pandemic and develop as they prepared to search for a new pastor. I started in June.

Trinity Faith Lutheran Church, a Mandarin Chinese-speaking congregation of our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, shares St. Paul's facilities.

This is significant because Monterey Park, according to the 2020 census, is 65 percent Asian, most of whom are ethnically Chinese. St. Paul's is mostly white, but with a few Asian members and regular visitors.

Monterey Park is a family-oriented community and has relatively little serious crime. That stability was shaken last Sunday morning.

My wife, Rev. Sally Welch, is a docent at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. She had to get up early to get to the museum for a gathering to honor another volunteer there who had died suddenly. We got up at 6:00 a.m., and when we turned on the TV news we saw the headlines: "Mass Shooting in Monterey Park: 10 dead and 10 injured."

The shooting had taken place about 1.5 miles north of St. Paul's, near the same street on which the church is located. "10 dead and 10 injured." (now 11 dead and 9 injured)

I stared at the TV, trying to process what I was seeing. Nothing about that headline made sense. In what universe do the words "Monterey Park" and "mass shooting" go together? None. Except, now, one.

Sally went to her event, and I went to mine. I called our son to make sure he knew what had happened before he came to worship and drove to the church.

I rewrote my sermon in my mind on the way.

I drove up the street, past the church, up to where traffic was being detoured away from the crime scene. I felt that I needed to be there. I needed to be a witness, to take it in, to let the reality sink-in, if even from a distance.

I returned to the church to begin worship in the midst of a catastrophe and shared some thoughts at the beginning of the service, thoughts that I'm sure many others had as well, but would benefit from hearing said out loud.

What can the Church say in a moment like this?

First, that this was the fifth mass shooting in the United States this year. This year! And it was only January 22nd. Since then there have been several dozen!

Second, that we seem to have become numb to these things, until perhaps they happen nearby or to people we know and love. How could that happen? Because every time they do, we hear people, both officials and just people we know, saying the same things. And nothing changes. That needs to change.

Third, we need common sense gun control laws that are also respectful of our rights under the 2nd amendment to our constitution, including a national background check required.

Fourth, there is a moral aspect to that discussion. Just because we have a right to have something doesn't mean that we should have it. We have a right to bear arms. Whether or not we do is a moral question. We need to have that discussion.

Fifth, we need a common resolve among tax-payers and voters to provide affordable destigmatized mental health care for everyone at every level. That treatment must include dealing with issues of perfectionism and conflict management.

Sixth, citizens of our country who care about building a civil society must turn away from our current culture and learn to put the interests of others ahead of their own. We must learn to make our default impulse to love and not hate, to seek reconciliation and not violence. We will need to practice comprehensive community engagement and

community based prevention programs. It will take everybody to reform our culture or it won't result in a lasting contribution to our society at all.

Seventh, what has become our radical individualism needs a correction. Our first thought when slighted should be reflection on what outcome benefits the community. Our last thought should be the same.

Eighth, we must communicate the message of the Gospel, that Jesus died for sinners.

I think that it's possible that the shooter in the Monterey Park murders allowed his hurt feelings to grow into rage, and then he gave into it and acted in that rage. In that moment, he wanted to make others pay for his pain.

How do we overcome everything we know about the nearly universal value, "Thou shalt not kill", stealing a life that is not ours but belongs to God?

But, violence never satisfies that rage. And, in the end, when the man returned to his right mind, and the enormity of what he had done closed in on him, he saw no way out. No path to forgiveness. No possibility of grace. Why do you think the guy took his own life, again stealing something that belongs to God? The Gospel tells us that no one is beyond redemption. We need to do a better job of finding the isolated and bringing them to the community of Christ that is the Church. We need to do a better job of communicating the message of mercy seen in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Ninth, I attended the first community vigil at City Hall on Monday night. Political and religious leaders spoke to the pain people felt, a dull confused uncomprehending pain. A nearby fire truck blasted a burst from its siren as it headed out on a call. It sounded like someone crying. More than one person quoted an idea that we call all people to live, one that is found in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and seen in Matthew 22:36-40,

³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"³⁷He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Tenth, and most importantly, we as Christians need to do a better job of leading sinners, all those living in separation from God, to the transformational relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot change the human heart, but we can point people to the peace that passes human understanding. We can't force human behavior to change, at least not for long, but we can introduce to people to Jesus Christ, who makes everyone who turns to Him into a new creation.

We see the key to that transformation in a sermon of Jesus commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount," our main Bible reading for today.

It points away from everything that the world values and points us to the reign of God, who makes all things new.

What would you need to call yourself blessed?

What does the world think it would need?

Take a look at who Jesus calls blessed, in Matthew 5:1-12,

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Could this be any farther from the values of the world?

Jesus describes what it means to be blessed in the reign of God.

Being blessed is knowing that you have nowhere to turn but to God, and that you have Someone to whom you can turn.

Being blessed is living in the freedom that knows that this world is not all there is, that there is a better life that has been prepared for us.

Being blessed is knowing that you are not alone, that God enters into our weakness, our mourning, our desire for a better world, our work for peace and our testimony to the reliability of God in Jesus Christ and He meets us there.

The comedian Garry Shandling once reflected on Leo Durocher, the ruthless coach of the Dodgers when they were the Brooklyn Dodgers, who famously said, "Nice guys finish last."

Garry Shandling said, "Nice guys finish first, and anyone who doesn't know that doesn't know where the finish line is."

God calls for justice among all his people but justice, in the Bible, is in God's hands. Justice is doing God's will.

May we bring this message to our hurting community. May our message be that you are not alone, that God brings a message of comfort and love, one of mercy and justice, one of grace and peace, and that we sinners who have received the mercy of God, offer you our community of faith, here and now and for abundant life everlasting.

