

“Singing for Our Lives”
A Sermon by Scottie McIntyre Johnson
For the Denton Unitarian Universalist Fellowship - August 3, 2008

Sept. 16, 1999: Seven young people are killed when a man opens fire during a prayer service for teen-agers at the Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

Oct. 5, 2003: The pastor and two others are killed when a woman begins shooting in Turner Monumental AME Church in Kirkwood, Georgia.

March 12, 2005: A man walks into the services of the Living Church of God in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and opens fire immediately, killing seven people.

Feb. 26, 2006: Two people are killed at Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, by a man who reportedly went to the church looking for his girlfriend. He later kills himself.

May 21, 2006: Four people are shot and killed by a man at Jesus Christ Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Oct. 2, 2006: A gunman kills five little girls and then himself at an Amish school in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

May 20, 2007: A standoff between police and a gunman in a Moscow, Idaho, Presbyterian Church ends with three dead, including one police officer.

August 12, 2007: A lone gunman opens fire in a Micronesian church service being held at the First Congregational Church in Neosho, Missouri, killing three people and wounding five others.

December 9, 2007: a lone gunman kills two young adults at a Christian missionary training center in Arvada, Colorado, and then drives to the New Life Church in Colorado Springs where he kills two teen-agers and wounds half a dozen other people.

How many of these church shootings, which happened in our country within the past eight years, do you remember?

The one at the Baptist church in Ft. Worth because it happened close to us? The shooting in the Amish community because children were targeted?

July 27, 2008: A shot-gun wielding man opens fire during a children's musical play at a Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville, Tennessee.

I'll bet we'll remember that one for a long time. Probably forever.

Because it didn't happen to *them* this time. To those evangelical Christians. In those historically African-American churches. To those peculiar, other-worldly Amish people.

No, it happened to us.

Why would we ever have thought we were immune to the kind of tragedy that happens every day to someone, somewhere, maybe not in a church but in some *place*, some public building or private home in this country of ours where mental health care is so very, very difficult to access and guns are so very, very easy to acquire?

Why are we surprised that we, at last, have fallen victim to the kind of violence against innocent people that is taken for granted in Baghdad and Darfur, throughout Latin America, in Burma, and in so many other places in the world?

We know that violence is all around us, and that bad things happen to good people all the time. But this is different somehow. It happened to people we know. People we love.

And we are naturally a little afraid now. If it happened to them, it could happen to us. If it happened to their children, it could happen to ours.

Yes, it could. It probably won't -- but it could.

There have been a lot of good and helpful responses to this tragedy during the past week. Our UUA President, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, and the UUA Trauma Team immediately rushed down to Knoxville to offer their support and bring their expertise to the people and the situation.

The very day following the tragedy, Monday, a candlelight vigil and memorial service were held in the Second Presbyterian Church of Knoxville, a church literally next door to Tennessee Valley UU Church where the shooting occurred. People from synagogues, mosques, Christian churches, and others from throughout the greater Knoxville community came together to express their outrage, sorrow and solidarity with the Unitarian Universalists of TVUUC and the Westside Fellowship - to express their support of -- well, of us.

Yesterday, Friday, another inter-faith service was hosted by the Muslim Community of Knoxville, whose spokesperson said that Knox-area Muslims “extend out open arms and open hearts” to the people of TVUUC and Knoxville Westside. “When we are faced with a tragedy, then we have to come together and stand together,” he said.

This morning, right now as we sit here, a service is being held at the Tennessee Valley UU Church to rededicate their building, to reconsecrate their sanctuary, which was violated by the gunman, and to reclaim it as their own sacred space.

You in this church held a vigil and memorial service here on Wednesday, as did other UU congregations in the area this week. And this Sunday morning, the first Sunday after the tragedy, we and countless other UU congregations throughout the country are remembering the victims and offering up good wishes and prayers for all those affected by the tragedy, including ourselves. These are good and helpful rituals, which will help us begin the healing process.

I'll tell you one thing I don't think is particularly helpful though. That's all this conversation and blogging about on the internet. Here is the title of one I came across: “Shooting raises question: Is it safe to be a liberal?”

Of course, it's not!

Is it safe to be Unitarian Universalist?

No. It isn't.

But remember that list of church shootings I began this sermon with? Apparently, it's not safe to be Baptist or AME or Presbyterian or Congregationalist or evangelical or Amish either. And I think we've got quite a bit of historical evidence that shows that it's not safe to be a Buddhist a Muslim or a Hindu -- or a Jew -- either.

It's really not safe to be alive, is it? Chances are we will all end up dead....

Questions naturally come in to our minds at a time like this. Why did this happen? Why did it happen to those people? To those good, *good* people? Why did it happen to us?

But here is another question: “Tell me”, asks the poet, Mary Oliver, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

As Unitarian Universalists, we know that *that* is the only question that ultimately really matters. “What will we do with our one wild and precious life?” And as Unitarian Universalists, we also *know* what our answer must be.

Despite or because of this tragedy, this blow to our hearts, our spirits must not and will not falter. We will stand together. We will struggle on. We will try and try, again and again. We will work for justice. We will open our doors and our hearts and our minds. We will never abandon the life-giving and salvific Principles we affirm and promote as Unitarian Universalists.

And we will remember. And we will cry. We will laugh and we will sing. And we will forgive those who know not what they do.

We Unitarian Universalists “are a gentle, angry people”. We are angry at the conditions in this society that give rise to shotgun wielding madmen. We are angry that children go to bed hungry and women are abused. We are angry that rights and opportunities are denied to people because of their race, gender, sexual orientation or disability. We are angry that prisoners are tortured. We are angry that our planet is being destroyed because of greed and apathy. We are justifiably angry about a lot of things we see around us in our nation and our world.

People sometimes call our Unitarian Universalist faith “wishy-washy”. They say it does not provide solid and unequivocal answers to life’s important questions. Oh, my friends, it is situations like this that prove that *they* are wrong! Our faith unequivocally and unapologetically answers that most important question of all. Our faith tells us so very clearly what we must do with our wild and precious and oh, so, brief lives.

We know, because our faith tells us, that we must respond to our righteous anger with a greater and stronger commitment to stand together on the side of love - not just with our fellow Unitarian Universalists, but also with all the many, many people of all faiths, and no faith, who love justice and mercy as much as we do. And so many of them have come forward to support us in the aftermath of this tragedy.

“We are a gentle, angry people” who refuse simply to rail and rage either impotently or destructively but instead take our anger and harness it and channel it and bring forth something good out of it. Because that’s what our Unitarian Universalist faith demands of us. *We are a gentle, angry people.*

And so, at their Sunday morning service this morning in our Knoxville church, they are rededicating their building. At our Sunday service this morning at the Denton Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, we rededicate, not our building, but ourselves. We reconsecrate, not this sanctuary, but our lives. We reclaim, not his space, but our heritage as Unitarians, our birthright as Universalists, and our mandate as Unitarian Universalists to go out from this place into the world and live out the sacred values and holy principles that our living faith offers us. To answer in the most positive and effective ways we can Mary Oliver’s questions, the ultimate question.

Yes, “we are a gentle, angry people”. But we are, also “a gentle, *loving* people”. May the love which fills our hearts spill out into this room and into “every casual corner” of this church building. May it grow so big that it bursts out through these doors and these windows and into the streets of Denton, Texas. And may it spread out farther and farther until it covers the whole county, the whole region, our state, our country, our continent, our world.

The tragedy in Knoxville reminds us that we live in a time and an age when Unitarian Universalists must sing our song clearer and louder and stronger than ever before. For “we are singing, singing for our lives”.

Please stand in body or in spirit for our ***CLOSING HYMN:** #170 “We Are a Gentle, Angry People.” Put your hymnals down - you won’t need them; I will tell you what words to sing next - and join hands with the persons next to you.

- 1) We are a gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.”
- 2) We are a justice seeking people...
- 3) We are young and old together...
- 4) We are a land of many colors...
- 5) We are gay and straight together...
- 6) We are a gentle, loving people...

***EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE** - We do extinguish this flame now, but we do not extinguish the light of the truth we read in the faces of each other, the warmth we have for the Kraegers and the Barnharts and for this entire community of faith or the fire of commitment to the values and principles, which make Unitarian Universalism a clear and shining beacon of mercy and justice and hope in the world.

***BENEDICTION** - For our Benediction , I ask you to pick up your hymnals again and turn to Reading #683, by the great nineteenth century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker.

And so we say together:

*Be ours a religion, which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth'
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.*

Go forth in peace, determined to honor the memory of all those who have ever been slain or wounded in the service of justice, by recommitting ourselves to changing the world - one city, one church, one person, at a time.

Amen, Blessed be, and May it be so.