

“Where is God?”

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt
First Presbyterian Church
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Text: Romans 8:31-39

Last night was one of those times in a preacher’s life when you know that the carefully crafted sermon that you have ready on your computer is not the one you’re going to preach. As you’ll see in your order of worship, I had written something on an abundant life, but the sound of it was completely discordant this morning. Our country did not have enough time to digest the facts of the brutal shooting in El Paso, Texas, before we found out about another one in Dayton, Ohio. It’s been a week of human cruelty and suffering, with incidents in

Dayton, Ohio
El Paso, Texas
Suffolk, Virginia, and
Columbus, Ohio.

Last Sunday alone, there were six incidents of gun violence, in Wisconsin, California, D.C., Illinois, and 2 in Pennsylvania.

And so, as we come together in the midst of this, we cannot ignore it.

So many lives have been shattered. As parents reach for their sons who are no longer there, and as daughters hold out their arms for a mother who will never return. As families and loved ones have been ripped apart with this bloodshed, we feel those empty arms and the shattered lives. All the hopes and joys of a lifetime have been wiped away with brutal bullets tearing into a crowd of strangers. The fabric of our country is so strong, that when lives are destroyed in Texas or Ohio, we ache with those wounds.

So, when we gather together in this place, we must name what is happening. We live in a world where the suffering will no doubt spark all kinds of political controversies and the solution to our problems will be presented in shades of red and blue as we wrestle with our fears. Some people will introduce legislation surrounding gun control, mental health, and racism. But even before all that happens, we must come together as a people and give voice to those who are suffering. We must ask, “Where God is in all of this?”

Romans answers that question. Paul wrote the letter to Rome. And we know a bit about what was happening at the time. We know that the Roman Empire was so cruel that they would hang men on trees and leave them on the side of the road. Some scholars put the book under the rule of Caligula, while others suggest that

Claudius was ruling at the time. In the heart of the Empire, there were Christian converts. Groups of Jewish and Gentile people were meeting house churches.

We know that there was some sort of religious pressure that was just beginning to brew up. Claudius dictated that the Jewish people could no longer gather together to worship. Then the Jewish people were expelled from Rome. He allowed them to return but demanded that they pay an additional tax. As the years went on, and Nero became the head of Rome, there would be targeted persecution against Christians, but this is a couple of decades before that time. But we see tensions beginning to rise. Claudius didn't like the fact that the Christians believed in a God that wasn't him. And some scholars suggest that the sexual prohibitions in the book of Romans were targeted at the excesses of Roman Empire.

The bottom line is that these are people who understood violence and persecution. They not only followed the teachings of a man who was brutally executed, but they were feeling growing tensions themselves.

In the midst of all of this, Paul writes some of his most enduring words:

If God is for us, who is against us? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I find myself, going back to these words, when horrifying acts occur, I'm trying to make sense of human suffering, and I want to know where God is in the midst of all of it. Then I remember that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That God's love is surrounding us during this devastation.

For the odd and wondrous thing about the Christian faith is that in Jesus Christ, we have a God who has been crucified. And when Jesus Christ was hanging on that tree, when he was calling out for water, even at that moment when he felt that God had turned God's back on him, *Jesus was fully divine*.

We do not have a God who stands apart from human suffering. We do not have a God who watches us from a safe, heavenly distance. We do not have a God who stays clean of the heartache of humanity, but we have a God who was hung on a tree. We have a God who was the victim of cruelty and mob violence.

And so when we see the scenes unfolding, and we ask where God is in all of it, we know that we have a God who is suffering right alongside those parents who are calling out in panic for their children. God is with the first responders who have the courage to enter a building where there is an active shooter. God is there, suffering with people who woke this morning in an empty bed. God is there, with those who are still absorbing the shock of living without their family friends and neighbors.

And God is in this place, where we break bread, remembering how Christ's body was broken by human cruelty alongside so many others.

It's been seven years since Sandy Hook, and many of you may be feeling that trauma in your bones. We carry it with us, and in strange times, we may feel our anxiety rise, as our heart begins to speed up and we feel jumpy. We might become angry or irritated. We might have difficulty sleeping. Or we might develop an emotional numbness.

The reason is because we do not have a past, present, and future in our brain. We experience the traumas in the past and the present at the same time. We carry them in our bodies. And so when these things occur, our physiology and our chemistry are affected, as if this thing just happened to us. All of it feels present to us.

And so, as you go out, please hold one another gently. As the weeks go on, and we wrestle with how to best deal with these tragedies, as we struggle with violence and racism in our culture, as we call out, wondering where God is in all of this, may you sense God, surrounding you. Because we do not have a God who remained distinct and distant from human cruelty. But we have a God who suffered, and who still suffers with us.

To the glory of God our Creator,
God our Nurturer,
And God our Liberator. Amen.