

I am so very grateful to be standing back in the spot I love in front of people that I love after being out of commission here for 17 days. One of the problems with being out of commission is that you miss things. Because I was feeling so weak, I missed Wednesday August 8th entirely. I remember a brief text message from Gail Mikula about keeping someone in our prayers, but that did not register, along with most everything else. A week later, last Tuesday morning I finally heard the story of an unspeakable tragedy involving an accident with a young boy and his mother and family. It quickly took the wind out of my sails. I immediately thought to myself ***How does anyone recover from something like that? How can you go on living your life?*** Some tragedies are so profound that they almost drain the life out of everything and everyone. These things do happen. They are accidents, but knowing that does not seem to really answer any questions. Yes, there are accidents every day. But that doesn't make anything any easier. What happened on August 8th was a big one. Just for the record, when something big and painful happens, the Church of Jesus Christ needs to not only be present, but it needs to offer something more that can help with this pain. Our tears and mourning are very important. But I believe we can do much more than that.

I need to share a crazy picture with you from around June 25th. It was a Monday morning, when I roll in and find Kathy Countryman doing Treasurer work for our church. I started to come in and I noticed someone had written something on the sidewalk with chalk! It shocked me a little, but it mad me sad much more. Here is a picture of what was written. Kathy's car almost covered it. **CHURCH BOO !** I thought "Why would someone write something like this? Did we hurt someone? Were they hurt by some other church somewhere else? Were

they just being silly?” I decided to be a detective, so I walked down the street towards the Poole home. What did I find? Other messages on the sidewalk with the same green chalk. And they were mainly silly. There were no other messages that said BOO! Just for us. I went in and got my own piece of chalk and added to their chalk art. Can you see what I wrote? I wasn't mad that they did it. Kid's do silly things, as do adults. I thought “Church BOO! But Why?” If we hurt someone I wanted to know, and would always want to know. But in the face of August 8, a new thought came to me which I want to offer right now.

Our Bible story for this morning is a special one from the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, involving the death of Moses. We are told that after all the special things Moses did for the sake of God's people, that Moses died, that God buried him in a secret place so that no one would know, but then the people mourned for him for 30 days. Should people cry and hurt and mourn when there is a great loss? Yes. We are told they did this for 30 days. It makes me wonder, should our little community mourn together for 30 days because of the tragedy of August 8th? I don't know. We probably will not do 30 days, but we certainly need to do more than one or two. To me there is a key thought here for us: When there is a tragic loss, this is not something that you treat with silence. This should not be something that passes by quickly. There has been a tragic loss. Something real should be happening in the aftermath of such a thing. Let me repeat something that must be repeated, that I just heard the other day: someone had died and more than a few people said to the main family who was grieving ***“Hey, let us know if you need anything.”*** Please make a conscious choice right now to **never** say that again in the rest of your life. *Just call us if you need anything?* That doesn't accomplish anything!

People who are grieving won't bother anyone else. They don't want to bring anyone else down. For us to say "Call us if you need anything" is really for us to say good luck in your loss. We are out of the loop.

Just for the record once again, I believe it is very good advice to have all of us, when faced with a loss, to not say "Call me if you need me," but instead to say "Hey, in two weeks I am going to call you, and we are going to go out for lunch, or go somewhere, and I just want to be with you." So we're going to promise not to say the old line *Call me if you need anything*, and instead we are going to be proactive, and we are going to reach out to those who are hurting. And we are going to practice something that is actually harder than it looks.

In our Gathering Prayer today we see a key word that needs to be appreciated and understood. Our prayer refers first to God as "**Compassionate God**," and a little later we said "**Teach us your compassion that we might not hurt others.**" So we have this word COMPASSION which we have seen so many times before. Well, when we take that word apart in order to really understand it, we see two words, PASSION which in Latin means "to suffer," and we see the word COM or better CUM which means WITH. When we add that together we see that compassion means **to suffer with** someone else. I like to explain it this way: Another person carries a painful weight due to the loss that has come to their world. What can you do? That weight that they carry is still going to be painful, no matter what. Maybe, we can help carry some of that weight so that our friend doesn't have so much weight to carry? Maybe we can choose to suffer with another person, and carry some of their weight, so that they don't have so much to hold. We can be people of true compassion.

Let me conclude this today by making a plug for something that is often not desired, especially in our religious culture. We are frontier people with frontier religion. Our ancestors met in the woods in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, and a hundred other places. 200 years ago we wanted emotional religion, we want to feel it. Much of our American religion is still that way. People want to FEEL something. They don't want to have to worry about books and learning. Well, I am here to suggest that our faith absolutely has lots of content. There are things we should believe. For example? Well, we should believe that God's Will does not control everything in this world. God granted us dangerous freedom to do what we choose. We have laws of nature that cannot be broken. If I walk off the edge of the building it is going to hurt! And regarding content, we need to stop suggesting that every single thing that happens in the world is all a part of God's great plan. Little boys being pulled into danger by their dog, or sledding towards a school bus, those things are not a part of any great plan. We need to quit acting like we can explain everything that happens in the world, just writing it all off as the mysterious Will of God! We need to stop this talk about God having a plan for every person's life in the world. That is not a biblical idea in any way.

Someone wrote on our sidewalk CHURCH BOO ! I have a dream, and it goes like this: Instead of having most people have no interest in people like us and places like this, wouldn't it be something if people like us would be sought out, people would want to know what we might have to say when tragedy and trouble comes? I dream of a day when tragedy comes and people out there would come looking for some wisdom from any of us, and we could provide some. Instead of looking at the church as CHURCH BOO!, people would think "CHURCH... PLEASE TELL US WHAT THIS MEANS."

I dream that when there are tragedies for a community people would come running to us, not just for comfort, but for some perspective about what it all means. 30 years ago I was at training with a famous man named Lyle Schaller down in Columbus, and he told a big gathering of clergy to understand our role. He told us ***“Imagine you are in an Indian Tribe. As the Pastor you are NOT the Chief. You have a much more important job...you are the Medicine Man (or Woman). When times are serious, they want you there. They want you to explain what it all means. That is your roll.”***

I have this hope that all churches could be places that the larger community would seek out when times are hard. They need us to share what this all means, why we live, why there is suffering, why we die, and what is to come of us. People need someone to help teach those perspectives about life. I believe we can do that. But we cannot do that very well if all we want to is to feel good. We all need to be little ambassadors of Jesus, we need to share some perspective with others.

If nothing else, I wish that we all believed in our hearts how the Bible nearly ends, in Revelation 21 with these words:

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with
them;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain
will be no more, for the first things have passed
away.”

Rev. 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Do we dare believe in the One who tells us “See, I am making all things new” ? If we believe, maybe others can have their fears reduced, if they look at us, and see that we are calm but hopeful in the face of tragedy. Let’s be the Church that is not silent in the face of pain, but is willing to carry the pain of others, and to offer calm reassurance of the goodness of God. AMEN.