

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
October 8, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Genesis 2: 18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

I try to plan a month or two ahead on my sermons, at least in terms of the general direction I think I will take. And so, weeks ago, when I was looking over the texts for this day, I had planned to do was go with the Gospel text, the part about divorce. What I had planned to do was tell the story about a man who was a member of a congregation I served. His wife wanted a divorce; and he came to talk with me. His question was about this text, and his understanding that divorce was inherently wrong. We talked about what exactly was going on in this text, what divorce meant in Jesus' day.

You see, in Jesus' day, it was very easy for a man to divorce his wife. If a man was upset with his wife, or tired of her, or whatever, all he had to do was write on a piece of paper that he divorced her, he was no longer married to her, hand it to her, and away she had to go. She had no rights. She could basically be sat out on the street like a bag of garbage.

Jesus was talking to the men here, because a woman couldn't divorce her husband. There was no such thing. So I believe, the basic point Jesus was making here was that you can't treat people like garbage.

That was what I was planning to do with the texts for today. Until Monday. Until the tragic news of what happened in Pennsylvania. Until there was the incomprehensible news of a man, who dropped his own children off at school, and then went on to another school, in the Amish community, prepared to do unspeakable things to innocent, innocent girls. Where he eventually killed them, and himself.

We have watched in horror, as the bits and pieces of this story have been revealed. Our hearts go out to the families of these young innocent girls. The grief their families must bear is, to me, unimaginable. The quiet stoicism of the families seems only to make it all the more tragic. The only thing left to do, seems to be to pray for God to give them comfort in their time of sorrow.

But my mind cries out, "What is going on here?" "How could this happen?" Why? This is the third incident of killing in a school in a couple of weeks. What is going on here? The explanations seem inadequate. Either they are too complex and speculative, or too simplistic. All I know is that something inside of the gunman went seriously wrong. In fact, any time that anyone thinks that the way to solve their own problem is to get rid of someone else, something has gone tragically wrong. The one who prepares to take the life of others had lost their sense of the inherent value of human life. They have forgotten that we all are God's creatures. No one is expendable.

Lest we think that the only people who think this way are the occasional crazed gunmen, we should remember what happened in World War II. There was a whole nation that bought the lie that their problems would be solved if they just got rid of selected groups of people. We remember most that the Nazis tried to get rid of the Jews. But the Jews were not their only targets.

The Nazis had wanted to exterminate weaker members of society, including the old, the infirm, and the mentally ill, but Lutheran Germany had a history of compassion toward such as these. In order to change public perception, the Nazis made propaganda films, with quasi-science that argued that, "Nature runs by fixed laws. The fox catches the weak rabbit, and the hunter shoots the weak deer." The films tried to make the point that weaker members of society were nothing more than a drain on society's resources so they should follow the example of nature and allow the weak to die.

Even though the Nazis exterminated the Jews, the Gypsies, and the homosexuals, almost without protest, the Nazis did not exterminate the old, infirm, and mentally ill. Largely because of one brave woman, a Christian nurse who worked at a mental hospital. When the facility was converted into a gas chamber, she did not keep silent. She documented the facts and reported them to her bishop, who released them to the public. The resulting outcry from the church forced the Nazis to back down. The weak of our society are not expendable.

But it is even more than that. It's not just that we are "not expendable" We are, in fact, special, we are precious. We matter to God. I don't know exactly how, but I believe that our understanding of that, and our view of others go together somehow. The more you understand how special you are to God, the more you understand that everyone else is special to God too. And the more you understand that everyone is special to God, the less you will be able to think of anyone as expendable.

When a person gets to the point that they feel they need to destroy another human life, deep down something has gone tragically wrong; something has become wounded, broken. And the one they are the most unhappy with is themselves. They can't value the life of others, because they themselves don't feel valuable

But that is not how God sees us. Psalm 8, that we just heard this morning says, in this way, "What is man that you should be mindful of him, the son of man that you should seek him out? You have made him but little lower than the angels; you adorn him with glory and honor." We are made little lower than the angels. Each one of us, are unique, special, beloved by God. But I don't think we all know that deep down inside. Some never learned it. But even if we did, sometimes we forget. We all need to hear it from time to time.

A pastor tells about the time he was downstairs very early one morning, praying. And his young son, about two years old, came downstairs too. The little boy usually was quiet in the mornings, because his mom told him he needed to be quiet while dad was praying. But on this particular morning, the little boy came right over to his dad, put his little hands on his father's folded hands and said, "Hi, special one. Hi, special one. Hi, special one." That wasn't language that his little son had used before, and it took a moment for the dad to figure it out. God was giving him a message, a blessing, through his little son. I daresay we all need to hear this message from time to time. We all need a little help to see ourselves the way God sees us.

Another pastor does it with a demonstration with a \$20 bill. He takes out a nice crisp new \$20 bill, and asks his audience how many people would like to have the \$20. Hands go up everywhere. Of course, it's \$20. But then he wads up the \$20, and holds up the crumpled \$20, and asks again, who wants the \$20. Hands still go up. Then he drops it on

the ground steps on it, and grinds it into the floor. Then he picks up the scuffed, dirty \$20 bill, and asks again, "Who wants the bill?" Hands still go up. Everybody there knows it is still \$20. And that's how God sees us. No matter what has happened to us. No matter how life has crushed us, scuffed us, dirtied us, we still are of immeasurable value to God, whether we see ourselves that way or not.

The piece that goes with all this is that we each have power, we have the power to bear God's message of "Hi, special one" to another person. In ways large and small, in the ways we treat other people, we communicate our respect, or lack thereof. We have the power to do good, or ill. You might say, in a world so broken as ours, what difference can that power possibly make. But I would say, you never know how much difference it might make.

I think of the gunman who shot those little girls. What difference would it have made if somewhere along the way, someone would, by their words or actions, called him, "Special One" until he knew it down to the core of his being? Would he still have needed to destroy innocent young girls? I think of all the ways in the world where one person or group of people has decided that someone else is expendable, someone else needs to be gotten rid of. What difference might it make if they knew themselves, and all people, to be immeasurable valuable? That sounds so simplistic, that even I have a hard time believing it could make a difference. But I still believe it is the place we must start.

I have been awed by the Amish people this week. As we grieve with them, I hope we will also be able to forgive with them. They have much to teach us. And maybe the hardest thing to learn is that we need to care about everyone.

We care about those little girls, it would be hard not to. It is harder to care about the gunman. It's always the hardest, I think, to care about one who does the hurting. But I daresay, we come closer to the heart of God when we do. We come closer to the heart of God when we grieve for the gunman, for the murderer, for the terrorist. We come closer to the heart of God when we understand that no one is expendable; when we see all people are special, beloved, children of God, but little lower than the angels. Amen