

Not a Game, More Than a Show

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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When was the last time you had an experience outside of these walls that felt like church? I remember the first time I had that sort of sense when I was working with Interfaith Worker Justice in seminary. We had shown up to do a protest with hotel workers. Plenty of people were there, but there was a loud and brazen band that was playing outside. They were playing all sorts of music, there was chanting, in some ways it was a typical protest – there was a flurry of activity, lots of intense conversation, a speaker, but I left feeling like this was a more authentic worship experience than I had had in over 20 years of organized religion. It felt like a real community had shown up and taken part in something meaningful. It felt real, I think, and that’s the problem with church, isn’t it? It so often doesn’t feel real. It feels like we skirt along the outside of the really real, like we almost avoid it as if getting too close to the real stuff of life, of meaning in our lives and the lack of it, or people facing injustices time and time again, of God seeming so absent from current situations, of our experience of God sometimes fleetingly matching scripture, and other times feeling like it just happened so long ago.

And that’s exactly what our ancient witness readings give us today – that real worship can actually be displeasing to God. Did you catch the part where the observant, ritually perfect worship of festivals causes a stench in God’s nostrils? That’s because while the words may be right, while the thing is ritually the way it’s supposed to be, something is not right. The real has been eschewed in favor of the glitz of the holy. We like the glitz. Who doesn’t. I love wearing a robe. I love the stoles. I love the music. But the question is whether it’s real. You see, it has to be more than a show.

It can’t be a show. Because church is thing that we do together. It is not the Elk’s Club with the Eucharist thrown in as Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it. It is not a place where we come and consume something passively. We either make it together collaboratively and feel a sense of true worship, or we don’t. And it’s not a game, or at least not a competitive one. You can’t be good at this, or better than someone else. It’s just either real or it isn’t.

And church is where we talk about the really real. The fragmented narratives of our lives are held up and examined to see whether there really is a light that shines through. As we are told by Leonard Cohen, “there’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” I am fond of saying that if there’s something we can’t talk about in church, then we’re doing it wrong. This has to be place where it’s all on the table or it’s all for nothing. Otherwise it’s just a show, and Netflix has some really good content available that I have no interest in competing with. Because we do something else here.

And one of the things that we have to talk about is the shootings last week in Ohio and Texas. There have been more mass shootings in this country than there have been days so far in 2019. Now, that's something that we have to talk about in church, otherwise it's just a show. So I want to talk about guns in this sermon. Now, one thing I am not is a political commentator. There are better takes on guns out there, better policy recommendations, and better, smarter policy wonks than me. I offer something different – I am here to talk about the spirituality of what we're dealing with.

And I can think of no other word for it in this present time than idolatry. We worship guns in this country, because we place them above the flourishing of our fellow humans. They are a higher good unto themselves, if you read what folks have to say. And that worship of the idol of guns is a spiritual sickness, a disease on this nation that comes about out of fear. The fear of violence being done to us. The fear that there are bad people in this world. To me the fact that there are bad people in this world should make us more able to come together for common sense gun reform, not less, but hey, what do I know? The irony that the people so in favor of gun ownership are in our churches every Sunday does not escape me, because rarely in our churches do we manage to worship God. It's just a show.

And God is calling our attention to spiritual rot and decay, to a world that continues to tear itself apart. It is calling our attention to the fact that young white men are getting these guns and enacting terrorism due to racial hatred. This is the highest form of spiritual sickness plaguing our society. So, let me be clear, racism and church cannot mix. Or at least they cannot mix if the thing we do here on Sunday is going to be real.

I am aware I am preaching to the choir here a bit. But thoughts and prayers for me are over. We have to put feet to pavement on this, that is my form of thoughts and prayers, because I grew up after Columbine. Where other people have the Vietnam War as their defining moral moment, my consciousness is forever haunted by the specter of violence at that school and the way that it has become so commonplace. For me, this is real.

And so, we will be doing something about it. Something small, but something. In September we will announce a bit of a public art exhibition that will serve as a focus for our grieving, but also I hope a constant call to action about what sort of values we have to bring to these conversations. I hope you will help me put it together – more details to come later as I assemble the needed items. But we won't be silent. We will place the really real at the center of what we do here. We will have the real conversations. We will ferret out this spiritual disease so far as we are able to in our little corner of the world. We won't be silent.

Because the church has played 2nd banana for a long time in these conversations. Clergy are scared to speak up, church members are afraid of saying the wrong thing. I am convinced that anything I have to say about the topic today or tomorrow or next week or next year will do far less harm than the rhetoric that pours out of pulpits. They in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “dress the wound of my people lightly, saying peace but

there is not peace.”We are the only hands and feet that God has, and if the church is going to do anything it ought to be calling us to put our hands to the plow.

It’s also a place for us to grieve. Let’s not forget that. These precious lives lost are the beloved of God. No white supremacist is going to take that away because it is not within their power to do so. That’s the really real. They are the beloved of God, and they were murdered by hate-filled young white men. I have some moral clarity around this, and I hope you do too. Let’s do the hard things. Let’s do church. Let’s be real.