

Reflection
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Today, we are invited to reflect on some really hard stuff. Rev. Gusti asked me to share my thoughts with you, and I will try to do justice to the topic.

In our rush to the manger, candy canes in tow, it's tempting to turn away from this part of the Christmas story: the reason why Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to Egypt. According to the Gospel of Matthew, upon learning that the Magi had left for their own country without meeting his request to deliver Jesus to him, Herod, in a rage, ordered the death of all male children under 2 in the vicinity of Bethlehem.

I've learned that at least one classicist, Michael Grant, describes the story as a "myth." But, as myths do, it captures something that's always true: sometimes, cruelty holds power. In this season of joy, systems of violence and weaponized fear intrude.

The death of all male children. As my atheist friend would say, "Where is the holy in that?"

Yet we must admit, sometimes, cruelty holds power. And all too often, it's children who suffer.

Since Sandy Hook in 2012, there have been over 2000 mass shootings, with over 200 school shootings. I don't know about you, but the call to "thoughts and prayers" is wearing thin. When teachers receive emails advertising training in how to treat wounds and apply tourniquets, when we talk about "hardening" schools, or worse, I fear something is amiss. It's as if we're being asked to accept this as the new normal, something we will have to learn to live with.

At the southern border, over 5000 children have been separated from their parents, as a result of deliberate, and I would add, unnecessary policies. Family separation is new, not seen in this nation since the days of the auction block and the Indian boarding school. The youngest of these children, I am told, is just 4 months old. You don't have to be a child development expert to understand the irreparable harm that will flow from these actions. Several have died in detention, among them Wilmer, Jakelin, Felipe, and Darlyn. With their families, they were seeking safety through legal avenues from the violence in their home countries--violence this country has had a hand in shaping. Those legal avenues have been virtually shut down, and as a group, they have been demonized and subjected to false witness and deliberate suppression of facts. Sometimes, cruelty holds power.

Across our nation, looming changes to rules involving Food Stamps & school lunches could affect 700,000 people, and fall especially hard on kids.

Half a world away, a virulent form of homophobia, fueled in part by American evangelists heaping burdens upon others, is literally consuming young lives. LGBTQI people are not safe in the camps, they are not safe in the cities, and they dare not seek protection from the police. Sometimes, cruelty holds power.

In our own school district, some children face unimaginable challenges before they even get to the school door.

Looming beyond all of these is climate change, which will surely affect the most vulnerable among us.

I could go on, and so could you. Sometimes, cruelty holds power, through deliberate action or deliberate inaction.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by grief in the face of all this. But we are reminded to be undaunted by the enormity of the world's grief, that we are not called to complete the work of repairing the world, but neither are we free to abandon it. I recall Randy's advice, that it's not necessarily always about doing great things, but sometimes, about doing small things with great love.

There are some rays of hope, and in some cases, young people themselves are leading the way.

I don't know about you, but I find hope in the Parkland kids' fierce commitment and passion. I happened to be in DC the day of that march, and the vibe was so hopeful, so peaceful with families with their kids, a new sense of resolve. There seems to be some hope of addressing the issue.

At the border, churches like ours speaking out & taking steps. Like sending boxes of shoelaces and other supplies.

In Africa, some LGBTQI youth are getting out, gaining refugee status. Geoffrey just landed in Canada about 2 months ago, and Patrick (another Patrick) has been resettled in Argentina. Our friends James and Hydary in Morgantown are working hard at a hospital. But those left behind are taking steps, too, raising money to train LGBTQI youth in self-defense. You may recall Brian. Inspired by us--by you--he is building a safe house for a group of young people disowned by their families.

And many of you respond faithfully every year to the backpack project to help needy kids in our school district.

And there's Greta Thunberg, a fierce young voice, inspiring many, who really does seem to scare the powerful. In this solar-powered school of love, we have a tireless advocate, and others, who are thinking about next steps.

Yes, sometimes, cruelty holds power. But as Rev. Gusti has reminded us, Mary knows that God can bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly. And at Christmas, miracles abound, if you know where to look for them.

While we continue the work we are called to do, Jesus' sermon, or at least part of it, offers some hope.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth;

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted;

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Pray for the children.

Amen