

Don't isolate in fear; Come together to stand close so that a better future can be born

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
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I prepared to preach on happiness, as you see in the bulletin and all these meditative thoughts. However, as I read and reread that sermon on Friday, in light of the tragic losses in our community this week, I realized that the subject of happiness needs to be put on hold. Yesterday, with more tragic losses—in Tucson—happiness seemed even more irrelevant in the now. I'll put the sermon aside and some week I'll *happily* pull it out when it seems appropriate. And it will happen—**sometime in the future it will be appropriate to reflect upon happiness in the now.** Even all the families touched by these tragedies will be happy again someday.

When someone dies or is in crisis, we who are affected tend to look around and wonder how the rest of the world can continue to function as usual. “Don't they realize what a horrible thing happened?” we wonder. We doubt that happiness could ever return. Then one day we find ourselves happy and even sometimes wonder if it's *okay* to be happy again. It is. So, we here in this sanctuary will focus on happiness in the now sometime in the future.

Today I'm going to reflect upon how we carry on by standing real close together when there's a tragedy, especially a tragic loss of a human being. When loss happens, and I want comfort, I immediately think of the particular scripture passage in the *Gospel of John* in which Jesus encourages his mother to consider his best friend John to be her son and for his friend John to consider Mary as his own mother. I think of this passage as a symbolic way of carrying on, of standing so close together that no one can fall. Jesus is about to die, but he wants family to carry on, even though it will be in a modified, even an adopted way.

There's another time in Jesus' ministry when he is talking with disciples indoors, and he is informed that his family members want to talk with him; they are waiting outside. Jesus tells his nuclear family to wait. He says he's already talking with his “family.”

How many times do parents feel that their children have found a new family with their friends, and they—the parents—wonder where they fit in? This passage has sometimes been interpreted as Jesus putting down his nuclear family in favor of his disciples. I think it shows us how much Jesus believes we all should be open to friends—even strangers—becoming like “family.” That may mean our nuclear families have to stretch a little in their sharing of us, but if they are willing to try, this often leads to everyone enjoying a bigger family.

I think that this vignette of Jesus telling Mary and John that they are now family presents a similar message. Jesus is putting Mary and John together. Obviously they could have found each other's support anyway, but maybe Jesus was not so sure they would take that step. **He** saw everyone as like family, so at least these two, he thought, should consider themselves related—his best friend and his mother.

Jesus had a sense of his imminent death. The teenagers who died in Redlands four days ago and those in Tucson yesterday surely did not anticipate those tragedies. Jesus told his mother and friend, “You **can** carry on without me.” I think it was also a command: “**Carry on**, even though I'm not with you.”

I find that idea, that command, that faith-statement—a gift to his family. You **can** carry on. Yet, it's only meaningful if indeed we grasp that there is something to carry on.

What did Jesus intend his newly created “family” to carry on? I think he hoped they'd carry on the belief that God, while not able to intervene to stop tragedies which involve human

decisions, is *at hand to comfort* and that God *keeps trying to get through to people to love*. What did Jesus intend his newly created “family” to carry on? I think he wanted everyone *to treat all people as equal*—whether they were from Samaria or Bethlehem, North Redlands or South Redlands or Tucson or Timbuktu. What did Jesus intend his newly created “family” to carry on? He clearly wanted the community *to help those who were currently in less fortunate circumstance*. Basically, trying to get God’s love through to human behaviors, treating all humans as equal, and caring for those in difficult situations are the beliefs and behaviors Jesus **always** had wanted his disciples to demonstrate. And, to this day, these beliefs and behaviors ARE worth carrying on.

On the national scale, our congress people will likely be more cautious, maybe some will be less available to the public. I imagine that some of us may increase, even just a little, our fear of others or, just a little, our pre-judging others—because our very safe community has experienced such violence. We may be tempted to pull apart, to stay home. We may be a little on edge, worried, even distant. These behaviors nationally and in Redlands are exactly the opposite of what could, in fact should, emerge from these tragedies.

This community, supportive enough to have its own newspaper; this community, with a very impressive police department; this community with a human relations council, a very engaged City Council, a conflict resolution center, a center for peace, an Interfaith Religious Council, immense support for a national bicycle race and all sorts of cooperative events—this community can become even more of a community. We can imagine God saying to Anglo, Latino, and Black, those in different economic circumstances, old and young: “Here you are—you are one community. Respond by becoming even more of a community, standing close together.” We in Redlands can take this event which *should not have happened* and allow it to transform us toward *seeing* and caring for each other even more. Nationally, too, we can pull together even more, live as though we are one-big-community with lots and lots of genuine dialogue.

When our son was in 4th grade he came into the house a bit jostled; a boy had shoved him down as he went down the aisle of the school bus, as the bus dropped him off after school. I confess that I was tempted to consider moving him to a different school—one in which I imagined there would be no violence. I had, just because of that incident, become fearful. John reminded me that **you don’t run away from conflicts; you get involved**. The very next day the principal of the school called both boys into her office and asked them, “to talk with each other.” Our son was shocked at how the other boy seemed vulnerable; he was not such a bully. The principal did a beautiful thing. She brought two boys together who could have become fearful of each other—and simply said, “Talk.”

The events of this week may be a call for us to have even more dialogue in Redlands, Moreno Valley, Yucaipa, Beaumont, Banning, Tucson, Washington D.C..... To talk with each other about difference, likeness, visions, dreams, hopes, experiences. To genuinely enter into dialogue.

Once when our daughter was also riding home on a school bus, when she was in high school, a student went a bit berserk when he got off the bus. He threw a rock back at the bus, through a window. What our daughter relayed to us worried parents, as the bus was quite late, was that the bus driver was amazing—staying calm, talking to the one agitated student as well as telling those on the bus exactly what to do. When it came time for her to go to school the next day, I offered to drive her, but she found that ridiculous. “Mom, all these years of taking a bus and after one incident you’re worried?”

Again, the school personnel were wise—talking the next day about conflict, how to appropriately express anger, how to be safe, and how to try to understand each other.

My guess is that the teachers and administrators at our High Schools in Redlands will react very similarly to the teachers at our kids' schools. Nothing takes away these tragedies, but coming close together as a community and as a nation is not only wise, *but also healing*. Perhaps in our coming together, in facing each other honestly at every age, creative solutions will emerge so that we all will have a more hopeful future.

Novelty is introduced into every NOW that contains even a shred of hopefulness. We can and should learn from every mistake and every act of goodness. Not only the judge and congresswoman, but also the young men who were involved in Wednesday's tragedy here surely gave the world, their friends and families *many joys*. Those who knew all these people who have died "received" them into their lives daily. When I think of our "accepting Jesus," I think of our receiving him into our lives, of being in relationship with him in the present, of being confronted with him *in our face*.

When we face tragedy, in our own lives and families, in our community or nation we, I think, are wise to follow Jesus' wisdom—**to create and adopt family members—to expand our sense of community, not to shrink our relationships**. We might learn more about some aspects of people in our community whom we had not gotten to know. I think it would be excellent to foster dialogues between churches which are on different sides of town. For sure we can check to be sure we're using the pronouns "we," never "they." We can no doubt increase our sense of sharing a community in which we see the sacred worth of all others. With all of our community leaders in all sorts of fields, we can redouble our efforts to treat people equally. And, we can continue to do what this congregation, I think, does very well—to help those in less fortunate life circumstances.

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The future will not be exactly as it would have been without Wednesday's and Saturday's tragedies. There is genuine loss.

Yet, we can trust in a hopeful future; in fact, we can reasonably hope for a future in which new hopes will emerge, hope for more dialogue in our community, for broader understandings between all peoples.

To be truly *hopeful* is to be open to what can richly happen *now*, given what *is*, and to be even more invested in our wonderful communities, so that a *better future can be born*.

Actually, that is good advice for us, no matter what our personal situation is: to be truly *hopeful*, so that we'll be open to what can richly happen *now*, given what *is* and to invest even more of ourselves in life, so that a *better future, even for us, can be born*.