

Eleven people killed, eleven people killed by terrorists. That is not acceptable.

Despite my hour plus drive on Sunday mornings, I normally am not listening to the radio but instead am trying to make sure I know my sermon, my own iPhone recording of which I listen to through the car radio, Isn't technology wonderful. And though I get up well before I leave home, other than a brief scan of my e-mails, I do not do as I do on other days and scan newspapers on line.

So when Jessie Laing noted that I had not in my pastoral prayer commented on the already then estimated as more than forty victims of the Orlando night club massacre, my defense was simply that all I knew was the headline.

And as the story unfolded up through when I began writing this sermon, I went from some ability to offer a simple explanation — an individual's struggling with the conflict between his religion and his own sexual orientation, to where I am now: there was a horrible mix of inputs, one *that from statistics could tell us that abuse as a child was a major factor in the development of a murderer*, a horrible mix of inputs such that the absence of even one might have — might have, though that the killer had cased part of Disney World makes me less certain — might have precluded this horrible act.

And while many bloggers rushed to blame Islam as opposed to the self-declared Islamic State, or ISIS, a column headlined, "Radicalization of Islam or Islamization of Radicalism?" posed the question, *Does the Islamic State radicalize or do radicals turn to the Islamic State?* Think about that: Which comes first, the Islam or the radical, with the end result being what we call, properly, I believe, "Radical Islam."

If that strikes some of you as being politically correct, I am failing, so let me return to the eleven deaths I mentioned earlier. Does anyone know how they occurred? *The occurred by shootings and bombings of abortion clinics*. And as we know, it is mainly Christians, though most prominently two polar opposites, Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, who most forcefully and consistently stress opposition to abortion (and I

generally fall into that category). Did their Christianity radicalize those abortion opponents to become killers, or was something already amiss that led them to be prone to acts of violence?

It's the same question!

What causes violence by anti-Trump demonstrators, that they are anti-Trump or that individuals looking to cause some trouble took advantage of a Trump rally? Certainly some of you share the memories I do of the campus radicals who wanted to take over campus buildings but could be wholly inarticulate as to why they had done so or what they had hoped to achieve.

What that column — and I — question, and now I am going to use tougher language, whether losers who feel they are victims and are angry “at the man,” *thirsting and hungering and groaning for something bigger than themselves in their lives or maybe just for acceptance by others* find a home in ISIS, or whether ISIS makes otherwise peaceful people into people so angry “at the man” that they will commit acts of violence?

It is clearly, I believe you will agree, possibly even more than likely to be the former — people who feel they are victims and angry “at the man” who become the radical Islamic terrorists, that the *radical* potential preceded the Islamic element. Consider again that abortion clinic murders.

But my point today assuredly is *not* to argue about Islam, it is to raise a different question more germane to you and me: Why don't such people who are lacking something in their lives turn to Christianity? Or put more the way I mean it: Why do not we Christians succeed in reaching — or do we Christians not even try to reach — people who feel that they are losers or victims and who have anger “at the man” but are in fact looking for something more in their lives and looking to be accepted?

Is it because Christianity has turned away and does not see them? Is mainline Protestantism too busy with other matters or too lacking in financial and human resources to do so?

Let me turn for a moment to our friend Elijah, whom we really met for the first time just two weeks ago. Well, met for the first time this Lectionary cycle. Living in the ninth-century before Christ, after the kings David and Solomon and the split of their kingdom into two, Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern, Elijah is dealing with King Ahab of Israel, the worst-est of the bad, and with his wife, Jezebel, who wants Elijah dead and who promoted worship of the god, Baal.

And being a human, Elijah is both frightened for his life and discouraged, and he flees. It is an interesting story, almost a parallel of the later biblical story of Jonah — and as my Florence flock knows, I consider the book of Jonah to be one of the most brilliant works in all of literature, secular or sacred. It is almost a parallel, because, like Jonah, Elijah cannot get away from God nor from what God wants of him.

Are we, individually, and even more, collectively, and “collectively” specifically as mainline Protestant Christian Churches, like Elijah? Has the world become too frightening and difficult for us, so that we want to run away and hide, to hole up in our church buildings, fearing being extinguished as church and pretending to ourselves that the problems facing the world do not need what Christ’s Church can bring to the world and to its individual people?

And is not God calling *us* to do something, just as God called Elijah, and should we not consider to what we are being called rather than just feeling woe-begotten, feeling the Ahab’s and Jezebel’s of the world do not want us around?

And is it not to people who are looking for something bigger than themselves and who need assurance of their own intrinsic worth as God’s children to whom God through Jesus sends us?

I think the subject with which I began my comments offers an example: downtrodden people who feel they are — and maybe by the world's and human standards are — losers, people who feel themselves victims, people who feel angry, people, even, who could in horrible fashion be led by the wrong influences to acts of terror against other humans. People who need a spiritual and maybe even physical arm around their shoulders. People who *thirst and pant and groan* for something they undoubtedly cannot even articulate.

What if, what if not only some probably semi-literate trouble maker in Raqqa, Syria could offer them hope and acceptance?

What if churches, what if people not merely proclaiming, but practicing, Christianity, were to offer a hand, a drink of water, a shirt on a back, a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves?

But we American mainline Protestant Christians face humongous problems in doing this, some brought on by ourselves. Our denomination's bi-annual General Assembly is meeting right now in Portland, Oregon, and for the first time in twenty years, twenty years! it will not be dealing with issues of same-sex-sex. Twenty years! And we and other denominations have been declining throughout that period, and are almost to the point of irrelevance in the greater struggle to which we are called. In addition, far too many of our members with particular political axes to grind make proposals to the General Assembly, enough of which are adopted so that when we read in the newspapers of the actions of a General Assembly our natural reactions is, "What were they thinking?"

And maybe the answer is, "They weren't, at least not about the Great Commission."

I do not want to argue same-sex-sex to day, other than to say that many of us have very deep concern for our beloved George Oberdorf. No secret: he is gay, and at least as we

understand, was married. Now he is facing a recurrence of cancer and the end of whatever his relation was, and if our hearts are not filled with wanting just to take George and say, "We love you," well, I for one would be disappointed, because George believes that he is accepted by us and has a home with us.

But there are George's and there are Gloria's gay and straight who believe no one cares for them; there are people who consider themselves "losers"; there are those who consider themselves victims; there are those who are tending toward anger. All, in a very real sense, *thirst, pant, groan* for something more substantial than simply what the material world is offering them.

"Material world." I snuck that in there because of a column last week by David Brooks who writes for The New York Times and I believe is also on PBS, though I've not seen him. Brooks in essence wrote that we place too much importance and emphasis on the material and not enough on *soul*, and while one searches for explicit religion in his writings, he is a Jew, his implicit appreciation of faith is not far below the surface in his work.

And where does one go to discover one's own soul and have its thirst slacked? I say, in absolute sincerity and conviction, to the God whom we find in Jesus Christ.

But suppose one who is thirsting and panting and grunting does not have *and has not had* the opportunity to encounter that God, but has had put before him or her what ISIS is putting before him or her? It's just a question; I do not want an answer.

So, my friends, before I get to my "cosmic" point, an equally important point is this: if you are yourself feeling discouraged or lost or victimized or whatever, if you yourself are thirsting and panting and groaning, turn to Jesus *and turn without hesitation to those of us who seek to be his church*; let us put our spiritual and physical arms around your shoulders so that you can know that you matter, that you are accepted, that you are loved. And let us help you learn how to pray, for while I do not believe prayer

necessarily gives the answers we want to hear, it changes us and calms and reassures us, and we can even know that others are praying for us, as well.

But also, my “cosmic” point, is that the success of ISIS in winning followers says that we as Christ’s Church cannot hide in a cave and wish the problem away. ISIS would not be winning followers were those followers not thirsting and hungering and groaning, but those are thirsts and hungers and groans that Jesus can answer, and Jesus answers through us, his earthly body, his Church. And as his Church, let us not fall into the pit of forgetting that Jesus’ call is to *all* humans, no matter into what if any faith they may have been born — not a call to proselytization, but a call to mission!

Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” — until now, until Jesus Christ came into the world.

But not everyone knows that he has come!

Though we speak of his coming again, he is still here through the Holy Spirit and through us; let us help those who groan and thirst and hunger know him by taking him to them.

It is that to which we are called forth from our caves, called out of our church buildings that we too readily let define a “church” is rather than to let “church” be defined by followers of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we gather, gather and from which gathering we are sent at his command to carry him to all who thirst and pant and groan.

And in his name. Amen