

By the Rev. Anthony Christiansen

This morning in our reading from Exodus, we hear: “Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

This commandment on idolatry stuck out to me as I began preparing my sermon on Wednesday, overwhelmed as I still was by the catastrophic events in Las Vegas to which we all awakened on Monday morning. No matter our views on the Second Amendment, it seems to me that the collective relationship of our nation to firearms is one of idolatry.

As I was fleshing out some reflections on this I received in my email box a message from the Office of the Bishop containing his pastoral letter to all of us on this tragedy. As I read the letter, I realized that I couldn't say anything more to the point than what Bishop O'Neill says to all of us in this letter and, after conferring with Mother Becky, I decided that I would read this letter as our sermon this morning.

Pastoral letter from Bishop O'Neill

Oct. 4, 2017

Yesterday morning the solitary great bell of Saint John's Cathedral tolled fifty-nine times—once for each of the individuals killed this week in the tragic mass shooting in Las Vegas.

The tolling of our Cathedral's great bell was not an act undertaken in isolation but rather one of solidarity—a response to the call of *Bishops United Against Gun Violence* to mourn collectively and for all of us across the country to name our grief over the deaths of so many killed so senselessly.

There is plenty for all of us to mourn. By some counts over 1,500 mass shootings have taken place since the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in December of 2012. That's nearly one mass shooting a day in this country in the last five years. While the shootings in Las Vegas this week are a tragedy, they are, even more tragically, yet another sad marker of a violent trajectory that will continue to bear us all along its destructive path unless we together respond mindfully and courageously.

As a member of *Bishops United Against Gun Violence*, I invite you to read the statement we issued on Monday, and I encourage you to pass it along to others. I have been a member of this group of some 70 Episcopal Bishops since its inception, and I stand with them in this call to the Church:

[Bishops United Against Gun Violence Statement >](#)

There is no question that we who follow Jesus are called to pray for the victims of the violence in Las Vegas—for those who were killed, for those who were wounded, for the families of victims, for first responders, and for the medical personnel who are caring for the wounded and injured. They need us to bear them in our hearts with love.

But there is more.

Our prayer, too, needs to be one of courageous self-examination. We will never become mature, well-integrated disciples of Jesus unless we look inward, prayerfully inviting God to illumine our own hearts and to reveal to us the ways in which we ourselves are complicit—either actively or passively, through our avoidance or complacency—in the unconscionable violence of our culture. We need the Holy Spirit to awaken our hearts and to stir us out of our own listlessness.

And there is still more.

Like the disciples on the day of Pentecost, we all have a responsibility as followers of Jesus to ask the question “What does this mean?” To be obedient to Jesus is to listen attentively and to respond actively to the unsettling movement of the Spirit, to consider honestly and openly how God is actually speaking to us through the events of our world and what God might actually be calling us to do. That’s what it means to be a disciple—to follow Jesus, to walk in love as Christ loves us, to act, to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our own indifference or confusion or pain or grief in such a way that we become those who actively bear witness to the life-giving and liberating love that we intend to proclaim. Our world needs our faithful, courageous, and active witness against the violence that so haunts us all.

While tragic events like the shootings in Las Vegas this week are cause to mourn, they should also be occasions that jar us, God willing, into a certain moral, emotional, and spiritual clarity that reveals to us the work we have to do, must do, as people of God. We simply do not have the luxury to remain silent or passive. We need to name our grief, to be sure, and we need mourn with those who weep. But as Richard Rohr has written, “If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”