

“To Mourn, and to Act” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

June 19, 2016



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

This is a day of mourning. We mourn the dead in Orlando and their shattered loved ones, the victims of Omar Mateen. We also mourn again the deaths and shattered lives of Emanuel African American Episcopal Church in Charleston, one year ago. I did a Google search on mass shootings, and the first site I went to was a report from the PBS Newshour, published shortly after the San Bernardino, California, shooting, which took place last year on December 2nd. The report called this massacre by Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik “the deadliest mass shooting in the U.S. since Adam Lanza opened fire at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, on Dec. 15, 2012, killing 26 children and adults.”

But the point of the report was that PBS Newshour had updated its map documenting all the mass shootings in the United States during the year 2015. When I scrolled down to the map, what I saw stopped my heart. The data source defines mass shootings as incidents when at least four people are killed or wounded, including the gun bearer. The map was covered with 355 red dots representing the mass shootings that year to date, at the

beginning of December. Much of the eastern half of the country was practically solid red with all the dots. There was one in Washington, D.C., on October 25th. Five people were shot and wounded, none killed.

What if Omar Mateen had succeeded in shooting only five people, and none of them died? Would our horror be as great? Would we even have heard about it?

During this past week, we've been hearing, again, the familiar conversation about gun control and the apparently absolute value in our national culture of the right of any adult to own any kind of gun. On Friday, a lead story on NPR's All Things Considered program was about the Sandy Hook Families' lawsuit against the maker of the Bushmaster AR-15 rifle that was Adam Lanza's primary weapon against the children and teachers at the school.

Here's a quote from that story: "On Monday, a judge will hear arguments about whether the case has legal merit to proceed to trial. That decision is expected to take months."

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And NPR quotes John Thomas, a professor of law and public health, saying, "Car manufacturers don't get this kind of immunity. Knife manufacturers don't get this kind of immunity – lawn mower manufacturers don't. But Congress decided to immunize gun manufacturers and dealers from lawsuits based on acts committed with their products."

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The theme that Celebration Circle has asked us to reflect on this season has to do with call, especially the call of the community. And they've given us this quote, from Jim Wallis:

"Whenever Jesus says come and follow him, he is saying, . . . 'I'd like you to pick up your life, to pack up your bags and come share your life with us.' "

I'd like to tell you about a new call that I'm experiencing, for which I'm picking up my life, packing up my bags and preparing for a change of work that will have me sharing my life in community in a totally different way than I've ever done before. I want to share with you some of the journey I've been on for

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High-need schools in urban districts often receive the least effective and least prepared teachers. The goal of Urban Teachers is a great teacher for every child, every year, and its approach involves a rigorous training program over four years during which I and my fellow student teachers will be working in DC public and charter school classrooms, will earn a master's degree in general and special education from Johns Hopkins University, will receive more than 100 hours of one-on-one coaching and support over the first three years, and will continue teaching for at least one additional year.

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I've also been a volunteer teacher of those classes and workshops for parents of toddlers through teens. PEP is an amazing organization, a small nonprofit that has been providing high-quality, in-depth education for nearly 35 years. Parenting is a journey, and every parent has problems, every day. There are few easy answers, and no quick fixes, but there is education, and it makes a huge difference. If you know any parents who could use some help, see me afterwards; I've got information.

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The only answer to that question that I can come up with is *call*. Those of you who have known me for some time may remember that I've always been skeptical of the idea of "call." My main problem has been, how do I know? Given that I don't experience anything that I can definitely identify as the voice of God saying, "Go and do this," how do I know that this isn't just another misguided decision like so many of the major life decisions I've made before? The answer is that I don't know – not in the way that I know that the sun will set and rise again tomorrow. But I have some reasons for choosing to believe that I'm answering a call.

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Turns out the application was a rather rigorous process consisting of three stages, each of which involved more challenging work than the previous. Essentially, Urban Teachers was asking its applicants, "How much do you really want this?" and I was asking the same question of myself.

Can I really do this? Make such a huge career change – at my age? Can I get un-stuck from my habits of thought and action that consume so much time and energy? What will it be like to go to graduate school with a bunch of 22-year-olds, and work for employers young enough to be my children? How can I leave my job, which is such a huge part of my identity? What will I do

without my office space, my own place to be, outside of my house? How can I give up my perfectionism, my attachments, especially to neatness and cleanliness, my compulsion to control my environment? Can I spend all day, every day, with people? I'm an introvert, for goodness sake. Can I really do this?

While I was going through all this, I read Anna Gilcher's sermon from last March, titled "The Poison River." The title is a reference to the cycle of call that Marjory describes in her book *The Call to the Soul*. The "Poison River" is Marjory's metaphor for the place of decision. As Anna reminded us, quoting Marjory, it "separates 'inspiration from application'; it is the barrier between the inner, private side of call and the manifestation of that call in the outer world." Reading Anna's sermon, I suddenly realized, that was exactly where I was. I was swimming in the poison river of this call.

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What is this “new kind of security”? What does that mean? Surely it does not mean safety from violence. Look what happened to Jesus.

And it does not necessarily mean success, not in the ways we tend to think of it. I am called to be with children in a DC public or charter school. My job will be to love every one of my students, unconditionally, and to do my best to teach children what they need to know in order to thrive and make their own contributions to the good of their communities. Yet there is no guarantee of any success. A *Washington Post* reporter spoke with a 30-year-old man who went to elementary school with Ormar Mateen and whose mother taught him in fourth and fifth grades. The man recalled teachers wanting to get help for Mateen because he was such an angry kid. And he said, “My mom tried to speak with his parents about him being angry, but they were very dismissive.” My heart goes out to those teachers. I could be in their position.

This is a day of mourning. And tomorrow we will still mourn, but we will also take action.

We all are called, in different ways, to this work.

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question; he had just reread *Lamb*, a book by Christopher Moore, which is a satire, but a serious one, of the gospel story. I regard Michael as one of my spiritual guides, and we've had a number of conversations about this so he knows something of my struggles. I told him the question is complex, and I'd have an answer for him next week.

Do I call myself a Christian? And, if I do, what does that mean?

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