

**Building Up the Household of God:
Putting Down the Sword
1 Kings 3:4-28
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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On Wednesday, Gregory Alan Bush approached the First Baptist Church of Jeffersontown, Kentucky, a predominantly African-American congregation in a predominantly African-America suburb of Louisville. The door to the church was locked. Had he arrived 90 minutes earlier, he would have encountered an open door and 70 people gathered for a Bible Study. After unsuccessfully banging on the door and trying to force the door open, he returned to his car, and drove around the corner to a Kroger grocery store. There he targeted two black victims, Maurice Stallard, who was in the store with his 12-year-old grandson, and Vickie Jones, who he encountered in the parking lot after leaving the store.

On Friday, Cesar Sayoc was arrested after a week-long national manhunt for what ultimately proved to be 13 pipe bombs sent to prominent Democrats or critics of the President. None of the bombs went off, but the Department of Homeland Security has confirmed that they were not dummy items and were capable of igniting. Soyoc's van and social media presence were filled with violent images against those who have been involved in public disputes with the President.

Yesterday morning, members of three small Jewish congregations gathered for Shabbat services and a special service of baby naming at the Tree of Life Synagogue in what was, very literally, Mr. Roger's neighborhood, the largely Jewish Pittsburgh community of Squirrel Hill. Shortly after the services began, Robert Bowers, whose social media posts show to be a rabid anti-Semite, entered the Synagogue and began shooting. Just minutes before his rampage, he continued a series of social media posts attacking a Jewish refugee support agency that works with synagogues across the country to sponsor refugee families, much like this congregation did in 2016. In a series of ranting posts over the last week, he blamed Jews and that organization for promoting the caravan of refugee seekers currently traveling through Mexico and yesterday said that he didn't care about optics, he had to "go in." As of this morning, 11 people are dead by his actions and six more are injured, two critically. This makes it, according to the Anti-Defamation League, the deadliest white-supremacist attack on the Jewish community in the United States in at least a century, perhaps in the history of our nation.

Over the course of the last two years, domestic terrorist attacks—defined as deadly attacks motivated by hate, animus or political extremism—in the United States have seen a significant increase according to the Global Terrorism Database. In both 2016 and 2017, there were over 60 such attacks, and there had never been even 40 in any previous year. The clear majority of those attacks were committed by native-born American men who identified as white. These last few years have also seen a dramatic increase in the use of violent rhetoric in the political sphere, particularly in partisan disputes and the ongoing debate about our nations' role in the global refugee crisis. Both Dylan Roof, the young man who committed the Mother Emanuel shootings in Charlottesville in 2015 that killed nine Black worshippers, and James Hodgkinson, the radical leftist who shot at the

Republican congressional baseball team last year, had histories of engagement in hate-centered social media communities where verbal wars ultimately resulted in violence in real life.

Back in 2011, a horrific white-supremacist terrorist attack by loner Anders Breivik in Norway left 77 dead, most of them teenagers at a Labor Party summer camp. Breivik had become radicalized in online white-power social media groups. In response to that event, an anonymous writer coined the term “stochastic terrorism” —“the use of mass communication to incite random actors to carry out violent or terrorist acts that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable,” or, in other words, the use of violent rhetoric as a “remote control to trigger terror by a lone wolf.”

The violent rhetoric of hate has become a sword wielded by modern day would-be Solomons in an effort to declare winners and losers in the debates over many of the great issues of our day. They, like Solomon, will say they never intend it to be taken literally; they never intend for violence to happen; but we need to remember the rest of Solomon’s story.

Solomon knew that if he divided the child, it would kill it, and the child needed to go with the parent who loved it enough not to let the child die. But later, when he’s deciding whether to be faithful to God, he forgets this story. He forgets who he is and he divides his loyalties. He divides the people’s loyalties by worshipping both Yahweh and the gods of his political allies. A kingdom that had been about proclaiming its loyalty to Yahweh then proclaims its loyalty mainly to Solomon. And when he is gone, like the child would have been, if he had not withdrawn the sword, Israel is cleaved in two at his death and withers for generations. Solomon is incapable of seeing that in pursuing his political goals he sacrifices the very gifts God has given him, and the ends begin justifying the means that are destructive and fatal for the community.

But let us not forget how Solomon’s encounter with the two women ends today. He does not announce condemnation on the grieving mother, he simply does not reward her lies and her acting out. On the other hand, the woman who speaks truth, who shows compassion and true love for the infant, has her child returned to her. She has a new chance at building her family.

Wisdom is, indeed, a gift that, when used effectively, leads to justice and peace. Solomon was given a listening heart and a discerning mind and, when the people bring him a clear problem, he uses these gifts that God has given him well and produces a just result. That was the intended message of this sermon before the events of this week. And I was going to proceed to connect the dots for you in the midst of the stewardship season—that we are invited to examine the gifts God has given us and discern how they can be used most effectively to achieve God’s purposes for each of us, for all of us, and for God’s world. And that still holds true. But now we can’t just stop there.

God gives Solomon something that is life giving, something that can sustain life and make it more blessed. God gives him gifts that let him help others and learn more about what it means to be the man God intended him to be. But he ultimately fails to use them well.

Still, God will never abandon him. God will be like the mother who says, “I choose life for you, even if it means you won’t be mine as you should be.”

The events of the past week have shown us that, as a society, we have been given gifts—knowledge far greater than at any time in human history, passion for the things we believe in, access to great and deadly power, even political might. And it’s all created with the intention of achieving what is best for all, what is true, and what advances the reach of and connections among humanity. But in the quest by some to maintain power, usually white, male, Christian power, we have twisted truth or slain it altogether. We have created winner-takes-all approaches to our political lives, and passions become a source of fear and destruction. Can we wield these gifts justly? Can we be wise and use them in ways that are life-giving, to sustain life and make it more blessed?

Perhaps we should ask Viljar Hanssen. On July 22, 2011, he was just another teenager, politically engaged because his mother was running for mayor of their little town, but a typical kid. Viljar was one of the teens caught up in that Norwegian white supremacist terrorist attack. Shot five times, including in the head, he endured multiple surgeries and miraculously awoke from a coma with all his cognitive abilities intact, but with bullet fragments centimeters from his brain stem that to this day could kill him in a moment.

In the weeks following awakening, Viljar was consumed by anger and overcome by PTSD. He was stuck; he was lost. He could have given in to hate and used his life to return evil for evil. Then he learned that the trial of the man who had shot him had been scheduled and he saw his face on the tv news for the first time since he saw it above the gun aimed at his head. And he heard that Anders Breivik was going to use his trial to espouse his white supremacist views and claim he was a political prisoner. Suddenly, knowledge, passion, and political will—the very tools that had been used against him—became the forces that drive Viljar to demonstrate that forces of hate would not defeat him—emotionally, physically or even politically. Viljar had previously been a young spokesman for the gifts of cultural and ethnic diversity even in his small town. So, he dedicated himself to physical therapy. He used scientific advances both to aid his recovery and to communicate with other survivors. And he used his passionate belief, both in his family and in a unified Norway, to drive him forward.

Eight weeks after seeing that television report, he walked into the courtroom without assistance, a personification of his family’s love and his defiant hope. He spoke of his fear and of being trapped for so long between being alive and not, both before and after his surgeries. He spoke of his decision to live, of his dreams for his future and Norway’s future. His passionate and inspirational reclaiming of his own life and hopes lifted the veil of rhetoric around Anders Breivik and revealed he was no hero to a lost cause, no political prisoner, but merely one who was pathetic and broken—a slave to hate who killed what he feared.

Solomon was given the gift to seek truth and so to reflect God’s loving, just vision for humanity. Viljar was given the gifts that helped him seek his truth, a vision for the life he still had left to live, a vision he is still living today as he seeks to serve his hometown as a 25-year-old city council member.

His bravery and truth-seeking helped a nation reclaim their equilibrium even as it revealed the truth about a tragic aberration in their history. As far-right nationalist parties have risen elsewhere in Europe in the last four years, Norway has largely resisted that trend, having learned a hard lesson.

Viljar demonstrates that what was good news for Solomon, the young king, is still good news for us today. We, too, can decide as a community, as a nation to live, not in fear and anger, but in hope. We can draw upon our faith and the many gifts we have been given.¹

May we, like Viljar, decide as a people, as a nation, to truly live, wielding none of our gifts like a cleaving sword, but as a hand offering love and welcome, a meal offered in compassion and communion, a passion for hospitality offered to widen the circle of those who have abundant and hope-filled lives, and may our voices be offered for solidarity and the healing of divisions. But also, may we be willing to do as he did, bringing all these gifts to bear to confront the bearers and proclaimers of hate so that the veils of legitimacy that surround them may also be lifted and carried away on the Spirit's winds of truth and grace.

This, not so coincidentally, sounds a lot like how Jesus will describe the coming commonwealth of God. May God make it so. Amen.

¹ Viljar's story and a chronicle of the tragedies of July 22, 2011 are recounted in the 2018 movie "22 July" and in the book it is based upon, "One of Us: The Story of a Massacre in Norway—And It's Aftermath, by Asne Seierstad.