

GIVING THANKS IN TROUBLED TIMES
a reflection after the massacre in Las Vegas on Oct. 2
by Pastor Hubert at Pinegrove UC, Oct. 8, 2017



When Jacomyn and I immigrated to Canada 20 years ago, we quickly found out about two special holidays that we didn't have in Holland, holidays we soon came to love: the first one was Halloween; I mean, how can you not love a holiday that's all about dressing up and eating candy? The other one was Thanksgiving.

Sure, technically we had a Thanksgiving in Holland, but if you

blinked you'd miss it. It wasn't a day off, life went on as usual. And in church, the only way to find out it was Thanksgiving was there'd be a vegetable basket near the pulpit, and maybe there'd be a special prayer of thanks. That was pretty much it.

Then we immigrated to Canada, and we discovered this whole new world of big gatherings over ginormous turkey dinners, and pumpkin pie (with whipped cream!). We experienced wonderful hospitality, as we newcomers found ourselves invited to those dinners & gatherings, and were introduced to a new tradition and new friends. We felt... included and welcomed to our new country.

And it taught me a few things. Among other things, it has taught me that "giving thanks" is not just about being polite to God by saying "Thank you, God" once a year for the good life we have in this part of the world (and let's not forget that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world does not have the good life we have here). Instead, I have learned that saying thanks is not just something you *say* –it's something you *do*. You do it, for instance, by making strangers feel welcome by sharing your abundance with them, and by listening to their stories. So much in our faith is based on the idea of generosity, hospitality and sharing.

Of course having faith is pretty easy when things go well, when the sailing is smooth and there isn't a whole lot to worry about. And giving thanks and sharing our wealth is easy when there's more than enough, when you don't *really* miss the food or the money you share. We say the prayers and we sing the songs, and we feel good about the world and God. And that's fine.

But every now and then, things happen that throw our well-organized lives into turmoil, events that challenge our faith. A job loss. Divorce. A serious sickness. Addiction. A bad traffic accident. The unexpected death of a close friend or a relative.

And you find yourself wondering (or maybe even screaming), “Where are you God?! How can this be?” Suddenly we are forced to struggle with questions we never had to deal with before. And boy it that ever hard! For some people it’s too hard, and they walk away from a kind of faith that hasn’t equipped them well enough for times that are hard or scary.

Others *don’t* expect any easy answers; they work their way through it and are not afraid to struggle with their faith, kind of like how Jacob fought with the angel at the river Jabbok. And like Jacob, these people will come out stronger and more mature – *and* with a limp or an emotional scar to prove it. Isn’t it interesting that it often takes us a crisis and struggles to grow in our faith...?

And then last Monday happened... A perfectly ordinary man massacres 58 innocent people and seriously injures over 500 others during a concert in Las Vegas. Nobody knows why, there’s no clear motive. There’s just pain, and grief, and suffering. And again we are left with the question “Where are you God?! How can this be?”

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday, and we have come together to say thanks to God for all the goodness we experience every day. But if we’re really honest with ourselves we have to admit that this time, it’s hard to do that. How do you say thanks to God in the midst of so much pain and madness?

It’s a hard, big question that we cannot avoid and which has no easy answers to it, so don’t expect me or anyone else to give you any pat answers, because there aren’t any. We’ll have to work our way through it, and it will be challenging and it will take time. Just let me say this, though: when death seemed to win that terrible night in Las Vegas, God was there and still is, just as God is right here this morning.

Our God is not some lofty heavenly being who just has to snap his fingers to magically end all suffering. Being a Christian will not shield you from the hardships that come with life. Gun violence is the direct result of what happens when we put our faith not in God, but in weapons. It’s something the prophets have been warning us for since time immemorial, but we don’t seem to listen. No, our God is a God who is deeply involved with this creation, a God who is in love with us and believes in us and works with us, a God who hears our cries of pain and suffering.

So where was God that Monday night concert in Vegas? Of course whatever I know about it is indirect and comes filtered through the media; but stories are now surfacing of anonymous people who saved the lives of others they didn’t know, total strangers. They would shield them with their own body, they would go back into danger and pull out victims who had been shot; they did that not just once, but again and again.

There are witness stories of off-duty nurses and cops and paramedics and social workers whose training kicked in and who didn’t run but stayed to get to the injured and set up a rudimentary first response system; some of them got shot themselves.

God was very much present and at work in these people who were not thinking of themselves, but of others who were crying out in pain and suffering.

Then came the bleak aftermath of the massacre. Finding out that you've lost your spouse, your sibling, your best friend. Or realizing that *your* physical or mental injuries have finished any plans you may have had for your life. The disbelief, the numbness, that terrible grief. Injured bodies and injured minds, lives that will never go back to normal again.

How do you deal with that? How can you ever heal from that?

One way that God is there in the aftermath, is in a pack of Golden Retrievers who arrived 24 hours after the horrific event. These are so-called Comfort Dogs, affiliated with a Lutheran charity out of Illinois. The group has trained therapy dogs stationed in 23 states. The dogs work in their local community at places like hospitals and nursing homes, and often travel to the scene of crises like the Las Vegas massacre. They have proven to be of tremendous emotional support to grieving people. People can pet them and hold them, talk to them, and use them as a furry shoulder to cry on. And it works amazingly well.



Tim Hetzner, the president of the Lutheran Church charity who founded the program in 2008, says about them: "Dogs show unconditional love. They're good listeners, they're confidential, they don't take notes, they don't judge. Dogs are an incredible gift from God. They sense when someone is hurting and respond to it without any reserve." Unconditional love, non-judgmental, self-giving, no reservations... Kind of reminds you of Christ, doesn't it...? So yes, God was and is definitely there; you just may have to tweak your expectations a bit.

And how do we respond to the massacre on this Thanksgiving Sunday here in Canada, here at Pinegrove? With fear? With a growing distrust of others? By demanding more security measures and more metal detectors in public places? Would that solve anything...?

Remember what I said I learned about giving thanks 20 year ago, when Jacomyn and I immigrated? I learned that saying thanks is not just something you *say* – it's something you *do*. You do it, for instance, by making strangers feel welcome by sharing your abundance with them, and by listening to their stories.

So let's give thanks today. Let's give thanks that God created all things, and that all people are created in God's image.

We give thanks that despite everything we do and have done, good or bad, and everything done unto us, the seasons still change, the world still turns, tomorrow the sun will rise again.

Let's give thanks by responding to violent hatred with nonviolent love.

Let's give thanks by joining others in acts of selfless mercy.

Let's give thanks by bearing witness to Jesus' love – without fear.

Sounds impossible, maybe even unrealistic, doesn't it? And it would be if it were all up to us. So thank God we are not alone in this; together with Christ we can and we *will* do the impossible. Death will not win; in fact, death has already lost; all it can do now is thrash around, trying to do as much damage as it can before being disposed of forever and God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

For that, let us give thanks too. Amen.