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John 11:28-37; Acts 16:16-18

LAMENTATIONS AND IRRITATIONS

This is one of those Sundays when as a preacher I have struggled to know what to say. We are still reeling from the violent massacre that took place here in our own community. And then our nation was visited this week by yet another horrific massacre—a massacre of little children and their teachers. This horrendous tragedy has rendered many of us speechless with rage. The image of a scary man with a gun locking himself inside a classroom and then firing upon captive children and their teachers is one I wish I could scrub from my mind. I wish I could wash my mind free of that image! We don't have to have been at the scene of these massacres to feel traumatized by them.

The natural place to begin in the aftermath of these atrocities is by acknowledging our profound sorrow. This week I shed salty tears of grief for the babies who lost their lives, for the ones who survived but must forever bear the psychological and emotional wounds of that day, for the families who will never see their children grow up. Tears are our natural reaction to such a grievous event. You have no doubt seen as I have the various journalists covering the massacre, struggle on air to maintain their composure. The grief is palpable.

Lamentations are what we do when confronted with life's terrible wrongs. We lament, we cry, we wail, we sob, we weep. Last week we here at UPC had a representative from the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program join us in worship. She came to stand with us in our sorrow. On Monday, all four representatives of the PDA who had come to Buffalo in the aftermath of the massacre, met with church leaders to give us a chance to voice our pain and trauma. And in that safe space, we cried and spoke of our anger and spoke of our fear and spoke

of our doubts. And by doing so, by lamenting together we could release some of what was inside us so that God could enter us and fill us. Lamentations, tears, honor our humanity and reconnect us to God.

Maybe you have been lamenting with people you know in these past few weeks, voicing your sorrow and pain. In biblical times, lamentations were not only done in private but were included in the community's public worship—part of the very worship service. Today in the sharing of joys and concerns later in the service, I want to give us another opportunity to lament. It is an opportunity for those who wish to voice what is upon your heart as we deal with the tragedies of these two recent massacres. You can voice your anger. You can express your sorrow or your frustration. You can share where you have found hope. No one has to speak but it is an opportunity to lament together these terrible wrongs so that God can enter us and fill us.

As we heard today, scripture tells us Jesus also wept. It's the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept. His friend Lazarus had died. And when Jesus came to visit Lazarus' tomb, when Jesus was surrounded by Lazarus' weeping sisters and the collection of weeping relatives and friends, Jesus began to weep. He didn't just shed a few tears. He *wept*. In the face of death, in the face of the deathly forces that claim our lives, in the face of our loss and our pain, Jesus wept. And in doing so, he shared in a crucial aspect of our humanity. He joined us in pain, in loss, in the ways life shatters us to the core. To weep and lament honors our humanity.

I am glad for Jesus' tears. I appreciate how his tears reveal his deep connection to us and our human experience. In Jesus' tears we can see how he shares in the sorrows of our lives, stands with us in our grief, joins us in pain.

But sometimes, sometimes I want Jesus to do something more than just cry with us. I want Jesus to stop that man with the gun. I want Jesus to change the hearts of our lawmakers. Tears are important but tears alone will not stop evil.

That is what is so especially upsetting to so many of us in the wake of these recent massacres. We feel powerless to stop this evil. A relatively small number of lawmakers stand in the way of our nation enacting sensible laws that would help to end this violence—laws that would still honor the 2nd Amendment but also honoring the need to protect life. This issue of gun violence is a uniquely American problem. Certainly other nations have their problems, but the relentless number of mass shootings is a uniquely American issue. And it doesn't have to be. Amanda Gorman, the young poet who delivered her poem at President Biden's inauguration, tweeted a poem in the days following this Texas shooting. She added this statement to her tweet: "It takes a monster to kill children. But to watch monsters kill children again and again and do nothing isn't just insanity—it's inhumanity."

Inhumanity. Jesus came to *embrace* our humanity and to teach us how to be more fully human. But the way our nation permits this perpetual violence, this killing of children in their schools, this killing of people shopping in the grocery store, this killing of worshippers in their churches, and mosques, and synagogues, this is a sacrilege and an abomination to our Creator.

So what are we to do? The majority of Americans want to see sensible gun laws enacted. And yet, we feel powerless because the system won't budge. The lawmakers continue to pander to their financial backers and their voting blocks back home. And so we lament not only the deaths but we lament our powerlessness.

And this is dangerous because feeling powerless leads to despair. And despair causes us to give up and give in. And that will only mean more deaths.

The passage from Acts today tells the story of Paul and Silas on a missionary trip to the Roman colony of Philippi. And while they were trying to carry on their missionary activity, an enslaved woman who was possessed by some kind of spirit kept shouting at them and bothering them. She did this day after day after day. She was a constant irritant to them. Finally, the Apostle Paul could stand it no longer. The Bible tells us that Paul was very much annoyed and so he turned to her and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out of her that very hour.”

It would have been nice if Paul could have done the right thing straight away—if when seeing that this poor enslaved woman was possessed by some kind of spirit, he would have acted with justice and compassion to liberate her. But he didn’t. Only after enduring great irritation did Paul finally do the right thing and free this woman from the spirit that possessed her.

Our nation is possessed by an unhealthy spirit that brings death and destruction and fear upon its citizens. A segment of our nation seems willing to sacrifice human lives for the right to unregulated access to military grade weapons. And the rest of us feel powerless. We hold prayer vigils and offer lamentations of pain and sorrow.

But the God of life, the God of resurrection calls us to not give in to the forces of death and destruction. We must find what limited power we do possess to resist this sacrilege. I admit I don’t know what form or shape it will take, so maybe we can figure this out together. But somehow we must become constant irritants, pains in the “you know what” until our leaders until they do the right thing and this deathly spirit is driven from within us.

When evil comes upon us, we must lament the tragedy. Our tears are necessary in order to release our sorrow so that God can fill us with God’s power and God’s presence. As Christians we follow the way of Jesus Christ: the way of love, the way of peace, the way of

justice, the way that cares for the vulnerable. Jesus weeps with us but Jesus also empowers us to walk his way with persistence. And so we must find our voices to stand before those who possess earthly power and proclaim our God-given power, and declare to this spirit of death and evil that possesses our land “We order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out!”