

### **“Practice Love”**

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Since the shootings at the K-12 school in Colorado, I haven't been able to get a couple of images out of my mind. The first one was this little kindergartner with his eyes shut – little blond hair – and just screaming, and his little baby teeth were all I can picture. The other picture in my mind was an interviewer on CNN interviewing a 12-year-old, and she said, “What were you thinking about when you were in the room and you heard the gunshots, and you heard the footsteps getting closer?” The little 12-year-old said, “I kept thinking that I don't want to go down without a fight.” The otherwise cynical reporter [listened], with a tear in her eyes.

As I said last week in the Prayer of the People, that was the 35th school shooting this year in our country. When did we become that kind of people? The sad part is, this week we have moved on to the next thing. It's over until the next one happens, and then we will face it again. It's become the norm. How sad; how awfully sad. I know that we can continue to talk about a number of hot-button issues about why these shooting are taking place, and maybe there will be a time for that.

But I want to talk about something else today, and that is role of love in our society. I know that sounds trite – and I apologize – but it's really not. There are themes that continue to take place every time there is a shooting, and there have been enough of them this year alone that you can just hear the themes ring out. The first one was the shooters have been bullied. Almost every single time they state that. They were going after this group or that group who had bullied them. Often those who are the shooters are narcissistic. They find that from their web posts and their Facebook pages. And finally that the shooters were unloved or were not valued in their homes or in their school. It didn't matter to them anymore who they hurt, even themselves.

Now, this is where the Church comes in. The Church is called to be there for those people who are alienated, abused, alone, or unloved. We hold that special place where we can provide the support, the care, and the love that other places find hard to give. I wrote a devotion in my Daily Devotions on November 29, 2018, probably right after another shooting, and I quoted an article entitled “An Answer to Mass Shootings.” I was quoting an article that was written by Charlie Hone. Charlie Hone, in “Mass Shootings in America; Why Men (and Boys) Keep Doing This,” delves into interviewing psychologists, therapists and others who are trying to grapple with how this continues to happen in our society. He argues that there are three separate things that happen, that breaks within a young man's mind – because they are almost all men. Interestingly, in this last one, one of them was a woman – but she saw herself as male. That maleness, that need for lashing out in anger is still there.

The three issues that Hone, in his article, said are what drives someone to this kind of violence, are loneliness, lack of play, and shame. Now I can understand the loneliness. Every time you can hear it: “Well, they were a loner.” Good Lord, how many times have we heard that? We use the term “loner” almost as if they are choosing it. Very few people want to be a loner. It's thrust upon them. It is its own form of bullying. Some people are

bullied with physical violence. They walk into the men's bathroom at school and they get pounded on.

But, there is another form of violence that is, perhaps, even worse, and that is being ignored. I remember as a little boy, I got in trouble, and my mother said, "I want you to go to your room and think about it. When you come out I want you to tell me about why you're in trouble."

I just looked at her, crying, and said, "Mom, can't you beat me like the other parents and get over it?" [Laughter.]

She loved telling that story a little too often. But it hurts more to think about it than to just get over that initial punch and you're done; or swat, and you're done. These kids who are ignored, day in and day out – who are made to feel like they have no value and no worth – are going through as much or more pain than as if they are beat up in a bathroom, with their eyes blackened and their lips bloody. "They're a loner" – that's code for they're being abused emotionally. The loner doesn't choose it, and I'm not surprised that loneliness is one of those the characteristics.

But what did surprise me in Hone's article about mass shootings, was the word "play." What in the world? What was he thinking about play, when we're talking about something like this? I want to read his quote because it is so perfect that I could never repeat it or paraphrase it myself. Now this is a writer, and, thank goodness, once in a while these secular writers even talk about God: "Play may be God's greatest gift to mankind. It's how we form relationships and learn skills, and master difficult things that help us survive. When little children are playing, that's their work. They're figuring out how to relate. Play is a release valve for stress and outlet for creativity. Play brings us music, comedy, dance and everything we value. Above all, play is how we bond with each other. It's how we communicate. 'I am safe to be around. I am not a threat when you know I can play with you.'"

Play is how we form connections with other humans. The irony is that loneliness would not be problem, if we got ample time to play. The other part of loneliness is there is no one to play with. When we don't play, we don't know how to get over our stress. When we don't know how to play, we don't know how to give an outlet for all that's turning inside of us, and it stays in there festering and burning away, until it has to get an outlet somewhere. If it's not going to come out in play then, by God, it's going to come out another way.

Finally, the third issue is shame. If you are alone and you don't play, shame is not far behind – and shame is a destructive force. I venture to state that every one of those shooters of the 35 or more shooters this year, every single one of them is so filled with shame that they can't take it anymore. My heart breaks when I think about an 18- and a 16-year-old, and those the ages of the two shooters in Colorado in the past couple of weeks. In that short amount of time of life, [that] they could get to that point, that alone, that tainted, without any joy or play. How did they get filled with that much shame, that they felt they had no other recourse but do that? How do you find a cure for that level of loneliness – that much despair and shame – and no play left in their lives?

And, there is an answer – and don't chuckle and roll your eyes until I'm done with this sermon, and then you can. One of the answers is church. (Wait to roll your eyes until I'm done.) This is one of the places where you can go, where you are not the greatest athlete, where you are not most talented actor, where you are not the greatest something that is lifted up at school, or in after school activities. This is the one place where you can go as a young person and be valued, not by what you can produce, but by simply being. Think about what that would mean to someone that's alone, who forgot how to play, who's filled with shame.

I'm so grateful for our graduates – both for Karly and Isabelle – that they were part of this church, and made it part of their routine throughout their years of elementary, middle school, and high school. Because what they did was not only just for them. And it's hard when you're growing up and you're an adolescent; it's hard not to have everything focus around you – that's part of being an adolescent.

But when you come to this church as an adolescent, you're here and you are doing so much, not for just yourself, but for everyone else that comes. Because the more kids who are in that youth group, the more opportunities for others to not be alone. To say, "I'm glad you're here tonight," may be the difference between someone going home shamed and someone having hope for tomorrow morning.

I'm so thrilled we have a full-time youth director now. This church has a long and wonderful history with caring for its youth. But for decades now we've not had a full time director. We were very blessed to have DeDe and Skip Petts – and Skip was an ordained minister. He did all those things. They worked together. It was wonderful.

And, then, when they were no longer doing that, the Nelsons – both of them – were so wonderful in what they did. Both Rick and Lori were so great; but they were doing it in their extra time. They were doing it part time. I'm so glad that we have Drew here now. Not just because maybe Drew is a better theologian than Skip, or that Drew is better at playing than Rick or Lori; I don't mean that. What Drew has, that you have given him, is the ability to be with those kids on a full-time basis; to get to know them, so that not one of these young people who shows up here on a Wednesday night or a Sunday morning can fall through the cracks now – because loners are good at falling through cracks; because he is looking for them, without all of the other things pulling at him – like another job. What a blessing you've given us by allowing us to hire Drew for that purpose.

I also want to thank the teachers who stood up here. There might have been 20 of them. I was sitting back here, blocked by the pulpit. I couldn't see them all. When you all made that commitment to this school year, to teach those kids, every one of those kids who were in your class on Wednesdays and Sundays felt valued, because you knew their name. If they were upset, you asked why. You cared about them as people. Whether they were in preschool or in high school, you were laying down a foundation for making them feel less lonely, and more valued and loved. That's what we're about. That is what we can provide that no one else can.

Now, I know full well that what we do is not going to stop the next shooting, even if every Christian church in this country did the kind of ministry that I'm dreaming about and hoping for, it may not stop the next shooting, however. We can't control everything. What

we can control is what happens in our little part of the world. I pray regularly that we will continue to be a place where young people can feel safe when they come here. If they are not a good enough athlete to get their affirmation there, it doesn't matter here. If they don't get picked for that play or that speech event, or whatever that other thing is, they feel valued here.

What is great about being a teacher who stood up here, or youth director, or confirmation teacher, is that we are teaching them what it means to be a child of God, and that strips away the shame – that intellectually strips away the shame.

Then we have play on Wednesday night. These people who say, “Boy, youth groups, they should be all about memorizing that Bible passage.” Well, there is a place for that. But there is an important role in Wednesday night activities just to be playful, because being playful teaches these people that they are worthy of attention, that we learn those activities that I read about. You learn to interact. You learn to relate. You learn to be teased and to tease back, without it being threatening. All of that comes, and it may not happen at home, so it better happen in God's home.

I'm so grateful that we have Drew, and we have other people, like Bill and other leaders and volunteers in our Church, who are taking the time and offering their energy, so that in our little part of the world, we can defuse that anger and we can provide young people with the understanding that they are valued and loved.

Now, my prayer is that this will turn into evangelism. I don't mean [to use] that word like, “I'm going to save you from damnation and it's all about going to Heaven.” We have something even more important to evangelize, and that's evangelizing love, worth and play. If we evangelize that, there will not be room for bullying, and other young people will stand up when somebody is getting bullied, because we have helped them understand why that is not going to work when we are around. And why we will stand up and walk beside them out of that bathroom, or out of that cafeteria, and out of that playground, and say, “I'm going to walk with you. You won't be alone with me, because you are valued. You are not shamed. You are worthy of my time, my play and my love.”

Now, those of you who don't think youth group time is valuable, or you that may think you have other places to be, and that is what it is really about, it isn't even about your personal relationship with God, as much as it is your helping other people to find hope, help and love. The more times that happens, the fewer incidents of mass shootings just might occur, and may we pray for that the next time we hear of a shooting, and step up and say, “I'm going to work a little harder, so that one child does not have to feel that alone, that angry or that unloved ever again.”

Thank you to all of you who are doing so much to offer love in our midst. Amen.