

On Monday afternoon, as news began filtering in about the terrorist attack in Boston, I had a sharp memory of a conversation I had sometime in the last year with a person who mentioned attending a church of another denomination the Sunday after a major national tragedy. “The preacher never mentioned it”, this person said, “he acted as if nothing had happened”. And so, this person continued, “I never went back”.

Behind that response is an important truth: If our faith has nothing to say in the face of malevolent evil our faith has nothing to say about anything, period. In fact, it is not worthy of that name: “faith”. It becomes instead the empty practice of a valueless and self-serving tradition, guaranteed to fade way into the mists of history.

A group of us met on Friday night here at church and the conversation fell to the bombing and the bombers – by then we pretty much knew that one was dead and the other in custody.

We also knew that the bombings had touched this place directly – a close family friend of Liz Kershaw’s – from her many years in Massachusetts had a nephew who was stading right in front of one of the bombs – a 26 year old single father of a 6 year-old autistic boy. He lost one leg, part of the other foot, and some fingers on one hand.

Hearing the stories is hard enough. When they come this close to home it’s harder.

On Friday we talked about how we felt – concern, sympathy and sadness for the victims AND for the family members of the bombers; a desire to respond in some way, to help; and anger. Anger at the heinous disregard for human life displayed by the bombers AND anger at those faceless, evil men who have so twisted a profound faith like Islam this it is, in their hands, a shallow, debased, and unrecognizable ideology capable of brainwashing good human beings into doing very evil things – something that our own faith has not been immune from over the last 2,000 years.

There’s always a temptation at a time like this to engage in hand-wringing, feeling that there’s nothing we can do while recognizing that we, as Christians are called upon by our faith to respond in some way.

But there are things we can do – and say – as people of faith in response to this heinous act, by recognizing what our faith is about.

1 - Christian faith is about solidarity with the oppressed and suffering. We may not be able to show up in Boston and help but there are other ways for us to do so, including donating funds to the various charities working to help the individuals and families affected by this tragedy. And there are plenty of people in our area who are suffering right now: helping them in the name of those suffering in Boston is an entirely appropriate and concrete response.

2 - Christian faith is about acting and speaking in ways that challenge and reject evil and work for the common good. As someone said to me at the clergy conference last week, “If I ever doubted that evil is real and present in human beings, the events in Boston would be convincing.

Sadly, there are more than enough events to make that point.” This is the flip-side of standing in solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering – we all know when we see evil at work, but we don’t always speak and act against it. The Marathon Bombings remind us that perhaps the most important condition for evil to triumph is that people of good will remain silent.

3 - Christian faith is about prayer. Whatever you think about the nature and reality of prayer it’s really clear that – at the very least – it changes the world because it changes those who pray

4 - And Christian faith is about forgiveness - which includes forgiving the perpetrators.

Remember the exchange between Peter and Jesus: “Lord, how many times should I forgive? At least seven times?” (Generous, because it went beyond the Law), and Jesus said “No! Not even seventy times seven!” Forgiveness, Jesus insists, isn’t optional or in any way limited.

But forgiveness is often – frequently misunderstood. So I want to say a little more about forgiveness.

Our willingness to forgive doesn’t mean that the perpetrator of some evil act is forgiven. Forgiveness has meaning and reality – is present and active – only when the perpetrator acknowledges the evil and sinfulness of their behavior, and then acts in ways that reflect that attitude and awareness; only when they actively show forth “true repentance and amendment of life” to quote the Book of Common Prayer. Without that change, “forgiveness” doesn’t translate into “being forgiven”. It’s as if forgiveness “bounces off” the hard shell of the one we seek to forgive. In our act of forgiving we will have honored our faith commitment by expressing our willingness to forgive, but the act itself hasn’t been received and acted upon. The person remains unforgiven.

Ultimately, that forgiveness only matures when the direct victims of the bombing are able to forgive. We can only urge them to do so – irrespective of how they might feel now it is the common experience of centuries that the act of forgiving frees from prisons of hatred, anger, and regret; but that act of forgiving has to be left to them.

Lastly, it’s very important to say that our acting to forgive, or the victims’ acting to forgive does not mean there are no consequences for the perpetrator, even if that person actively changes and seeks forgiveness. Central to the process of forgiving and being forgiven is that the sinner – and I use that word intentionally – accepts the consequences of their actions. Forgiving does not free the perpetrator from consequences of their actions.

5 - And, lastly, Christianity is about living in the resurrection light. This is not a hollow, “happy-clappy” joy but one grounded in the experience of Good Friday, and the long shadow of the cross. We celebrate because we know the meaning of pain and suffering.

These five represent, I believe, an appropriate response to last week’s hideous bombings:

- our willingness to stand and act in solidarity with the oppressed and suffering;
- our willingness to act and speak in ways that challenge and reject evil and work for the common good.

- our willingness to pray; and,
- our willingness to forgive.
- our willingness to proclaim the Good News of God's salvation as people of the Resurrection.

I also want to underscore what I hinted at earlier: that we must be very careful not to demonize Islam because of the actions of some of its deeply misguided adherents. We need to remind ourselves that the perpetrators of the massacres at Sandyhook Elementary School and in Aurora, CO, where both white Caucasians and – nominally, at least – Christians; as were those responsible for the murders of six million Jews and another seven million gentiles before and during World War II.

And, too, we should remember that Islam itself and the vast majority of Muslims – including pretty much every American Muslim – have and will condemn this murderous act as not just reprehensible but utterly evil, and something that Islam – a religion of peace as much as Christianity is a religion of peace – rejects.

This day is the day we had decided some time ago to remember and celebrate “Earth Day” – actually it's tomorrow. It is, in light of the events in Boston last week, an even more appropriate moment to remember and to ritualize, because Earth Day is, among other things, a salutary reminder that we only have one earth – there is no “spare earth” stored away somewhere to be hauled out in the event we irreparably damage this one, and that every major religion on this planet – Christianity and Islam included – view this earth as part of God's creation, as good, and as something we should protect as creatures of its creator.

May we so act and may it so be.

Amen.