

I've received some strange criticisms over the years; enough to realize that sometimes criticisms reveal more about the person doing the criticizing than they do about me. One of the most consistent criticisms I've received started when I was in seminary.

It was the last semester of my senior or last year of the three-year academic and religious formation degree required for all people who feel called to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. That last semester we had to take Homiletics 2, a class of preaching, listening to each other preach and evaluating each other. One of our assignments was to preach a sermon for a tragic situation of our choosing. It was spring of 2007, shortly after the mass shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia where 32 people including the shooter lost their lives, 17 more were wounded, and 6 suffered injury from jumping out of windows to escape the shooter. Maybe because it was in the news, or maybe because I was still processing it, or maybe because I was already feeling drawn to a campus community, or maybe because I was living on a campus for higher education, I chose to write a sermon for a *fictional* funeral of a *fictional* young woman I made up who had died in a *fictional* mass shooting. I used some of my own personal memories to try and make my fictional character real and relatable. I preached on love, the shared grief and powerlessness the tragedy produced that will linger long after the news moved on, and how as a community we can grieve together by caring for each other and in so doing find God in the midst of senseless tragedy.

The toughest part of that class was often the feedback and evaluation by our professor, who was one of the toughest at seminary, and my classmates. Overall, the feedback I got from my professor and classmates was positive. A few classmates said it helped them process the Virginia Tech shooting. But there is always that person who doesn't like a sermon. That day one of my classmates' feedback was he thought I had taken on too much. He said I shouldn't talk about such things because I was out of my league, and he couldn't understand how or why I could care about something he believed had nothing to do with me or him, something that happened in another place and probably was something none of us would deal with in the future.

That was not the only time I was criticized for caring by people both in and outside the church. While my colleagues, friends and acquaintances are certainly entitled to their own opinions, I respectfully disagree with that one. I don't

believe it is wrong to care. In fact, I believe it is Christ-like to care about the world and everyone in it. I know it is not easy. I know it will lead to heart ache and heart break. But the pain does not mean caring is wrong.

It seems to me not caring is the stuff of sin that causes even more pain, because not caring for each other is where I believe many tragedies like the mass shootings we've had far too often in the last few weeks comes from. Not giving a thought for the people who will live with the weight of grief for the rest of their lives from an action that took a fraction of a second is not caring. Just like not bothering to learn about the complex ecosystems of forests before deciding to strip an entire forest of every single tree at once that causes immense damage to the soil, air, and animals that lived in that forest is another example of not caring. In the reading from Acts of the Apostles this morning we see how no one cared for a young girl who was possessed with a spirit of divination. One of the many, many reasons why slavery is wrong is we saw those who exploited her labor cared more about the income they lost when Paul healed her. Not even Paul seemed to care about her future welfare. It wasn't until Paul showed care for the jailer that the story turned around. Unfortunately, we only hear how it turned around for Paul, not the girl.

One of the good friends I made in seminary was – like me - single at the time. Unlike me, however, as can happen when you are in a high stress situation in a small intentional community, she developed a romantic crush on a fellow seminarian who was married and had five children. I listened to my friend talk about how her crush confided in her he didn't think his wife understood him and how excited he was to work with her, and she told me how excited she got every time she saw him. When she asked my thoughts, I said to her I don't consider married men to be available nor do I see them as sexually attractive. She asked how I did that. I said because I see them as connected to their spouses and their children, who I also know. I can foresee the pain and suffering affairs and divorces can cause families. Because I care for the spouses and children in those families, I do not want to cause them pain they will deal with for the rest of their lives. It just isn't about the Ten Commandments or church dogma, or the rules set forth by bishops for seminarians, it's about the care at the heart of those things, a care based on the love of God embodied in Jesus, who shows us with his words and actions how much he and how much God cares.

There used to be a popular acronym inspired by a book both liberal and conservative Christians embraced: *WWJD*. We put it on everything we could think of: jewelry, clothing, water bottles, banners, mugs, and stickers. It stood for *What would Jesus do?* and was later changed to *What would Jesus want me to do*.

Either way, it was intended to inspire those of us who follow Jesus today to think how our words and our actions might reflect the love of God in Christ instead of our own selfish ambitions, desires, fears, phobias, or greed. It's gone out of fashion now, but it isn't a bad lens through which to view the world and our lives as individuals and a church.

If we look at today's Gospel, we see one of the ways Jesus showed his care. He prayed. If we look at all four Gospels, we'd see Jesus prayed a lot. Sometimes he prayed in a formal corporate religious setting, like when he went to worship services. Other times he prayed in private. Sometimes – like we see in today's Gospel reading - he prayed with his disciples. Today's Gospel reveals *what* Jesus prayed. He prayed for those he cared for. Those who followed him then and those who will follow him in the future, that means you and me. We don't think about that very often. Jesus prayed for us. Still is praying for us, which means Jesus is thinking about us. Because Jesus cares.

Although I understand the emotion behind the statement, I am disappointed every time I hear someone say prayers don't matter, only actions matter. If that were true, then why did Jesus pray so much? In today's Gospel his prayer happens just before his arrest, trial, death, and resurrection. Jesus' shows us today that prayer is important, even when we might feel powerless. Prayer is a connection between people and God and with each other, not a manipulation to get people or God to do what we want. Prayer is something we can do when faced with systems or situations we can't solve or fix by ourselves. Prayer can be a way we are connected, especially when we are broken, when we feel the pain of loss, are afraid, or feel isolated. Prayer can help determine if the action we are contemplating is Christ-like or not. Plenty of people commit atrocities in the name of God or Jesus, but that does not make what they did Christ-like, and certainly does not justify intentional harm.

Caring can be tiring, which is why having a connection with God and each other is also important. When we care for each other, even if it is just praying for each other, it can help ease suffering. It might not erase the past, but it can help us accept the present and help us realize none of us has to be alone. Caring means giving up something of ourselves that is difficult to do: things like unhealthy ego and pride, fear, resentment of those who are different, or desiring revenge. It means intentionally looking for common ground and acknowledging our shared humanity, even our shared suffering. Caring does not mean letting someone harm us or others. Caring can and must have healthy emotional, spiritual, and physical boundaries. That's why its helpful to keep looking at Jesus to discern what care looks like.

Today I invite you to show you care. To embody the love of Jesus. Our ministries are definitely an embodiment of care. The free face masks we are continuing to give away, wearing a mask whenever we are in the building shows we care about each other, the COVID-19 memorial that continues to draw visitors, making room for two people who were not members of this parish to have their cremains interred by our columbarium, the cabinet of sharing outdoor food party, the prayer shawl ministry, are just a few ways of showing we care. Starting this week, I will be inviting you all and anyone else to join me on the front porch every Wednesday at noon for prayer. These are public and corporate expressions of care that reveal God's love present in the world.

The invitation I have for you all is to consider how you can express this care as an individual in your family, workplace, neighborhood, here at church, wherever you find yourself this week. Maybe help a neighbor or spouse with a difficult or mundane chore without being asked. Maybe tell someone you are grateful for them or something they did, even if it wasn't something they did for you. Is there someone who irritates you? Maybe cut them some slack. Maybe, like I did with my friend in seminary (who, by the way, is now happily married to a wonderful man) remind them they can be better. One of my practices is every time I see a dead animal or trash on the side of the road I say the prayer, "Lord, please forgive us for our carelessness." I have a feeling you know best how you can show care.

Caring can have a positive impact. I believe when someone is shown care, they are more likely to show care for themselves and others. Care, even through difficult situations that can help us connect to each other and to God. That kind of connection might just influence the kind of change that can make the world better for everyone. It might not happen quickly or all at once. But like resurrection life, like that tiny mustard seed Jesus talked about, what starts small, even caring, can grow and spread.