

Young Deaths Evoke the ‘Why’ Question

-The Very Rev. Dr. Philip C. Linder

These have been a long two weeks in the state of South Carolina, and especially on the campuses of the University of South Carolina and Clemson University. Whenever young, promising lives are taken from us suddenly and tragically there is a pervasive sadness that runs through the veins of our community, coupled with the nagging “why” question that lie just below the surface of our tears.

When I first saw the vivid news’ images of a beach house ablaze in flames on that early Sunday morning, one filled with college students, I said aloud, “Oh my God.” And this was simultaneously both a prayer and a questioning of how such a thing could have happened. As the father of three children of similar ages to those who perished, like any parent I felt how vulnerable we all are to the chances of life that often seem so cruel and unfair. Most parents have allowed their college age children to go to the beach with friends, asking that they be safe and especially do not drink and drive. These young people seemed to have done the right thing. We are drawn to question then a God that would allow such a tragedy to come upon them, their parents, families, friends, universities, and communities?

As priest, theologian, and most of all a parent, I find that questioning made ever more difficult when I hear someone saying, especially a clergyperson, that it was God’s will, or part of God’s plan for them. Long before I was a priest, Phyllis, a beautiful young friend in her twenties died from cancer. I will never forget the priest at her funeral service saying that, “God must have wanted such a beautiful flower like Phyllis in heaven.” If that had been my daughter, I would have been furious at both God and the Church possibly forever. The hard truth of this life is that God does not push every button, nor pull every string; there is a freedom in the universe where deaths such as those of these beloved young people from USC and Clemson can and do occur, and there is great mystery in the midst of such events.

What is not mysterious though is the reality that God does not inflict such pain and tragedy upon any individual, family, or community. God is instead one who stands with us in our grief as a God of compassion.

Jesus said: “be compassionate as God is compassionate.” These words found in Luke 6:36 emphasize a constant theme that Jesus brings to the forefront of his teachings. And we can once again see that the radical nature of Jesus’ teachings was often found in his calling the disciples, the followers of his Way, to imitate God’s nature—*imitatio dei*—be an imitation of God.

So that to live in the kingdom of God was to be a person who imitated the compassion of God. And rather than asking “why” it is here that we must focus our attention.

The word “compassion” was a word that was incredibly rich in the Jewish culture of Christ. In Hebrew the word usually translated as “compassion” is the plural of the noun that in its singular form means “womb.” Compassion in the Bible is often linked to the womb; as a feeling, located in a certain part of the body, deep within. To be compassionate is to literally “feel or suffer with.” And I believe that this is the greatest offering that we can give to the parents, families, friends, and universities of these young souls that have gone to God.

And so as the final student has now been laid to rest, and the memorial services come to an end, may we be intentional about not forgetting these young lives tragically taken in their prime. As the rhythm of daily life once again begins to flow normally for most of us, be compassionate—pause to suffer and feel with all who will be in grief for a very long time. Pray that they will be able to move beyond the “why” question, and instead find some comfort in both the compassion and tears of each of us, and especially of God. “Rest eternal grant to them O Lord, and may light perpetual shine upon them.”