

THE COURAGE OF COMMUNITY

A Sermon by Rev. Fritz Hudson

September 7, 2008

Yesterday and Friday, I made a short trip in your service. I went over to Ames, Iowa, to facilitate the annual planning retreat for the Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames. It was our payback for their minister, Brian Eslinger's, trip over here, two weeks ago, to facilitate our Trustees' retreat.

In those hours in the car, I recalled a somewhat similar trek I'd made now 30 years ago. It was also across a state line - from my first church, in Wilmington, North Carolina to our church in Knoxville, Tennessee. But I didn't make that trip alone. I was ferrying our church's youth to a district conference, forging their first ties, I hoped, to our faith's larger world. My brain still carries snapshots of both the church and the town, all positive, beautiful even. The dust which had accumulated over them in the passing of time had in fact already been cleared away when our son, Eric, a year ago, enrolled at the University in Knoxville to finish his graduate studies in Sports Management. And then of course, just six weeks ago, they were brought forward in vivid detail by a phone call. It was Eric's call recounting to me what had occurred that morning, Sunday July 27, at that Knoxville church.

My image of myself in that church in the company those many youth, meshes very quickly, easily – though both comfortably and uncomfortably - into the image we just created here this morning. It seems of one piece with the covenant we've all just made with all our children and youth – to "strive to understand ourselves and one another, and to extend the spirit of goodwill as far as our love can reach." But what happened in that church, with all their children and youth gathered there, this past July 27 strains all Unitarian Universalists' understanding - of ourselves and of others. It also challenges our spirit of goodwill and the reach of our love. So I'd like to bring what happened there more deeply into our minds and hearts here this morning. I'd like to see if our shared contemplation of the good and evil in that event there and then can deepen our appreciation for, and commitment to, the covenant we now and here are undertaking.

The first facts of what happened Sunday, July 27 in Knoxville are painfully simple to tell. There are two Unitarian Universalist churches in that city: the older Tennessee Valley UU Church and the newer Westside UU Church. On that Sunday morning they were meeting as a combined congregation at the Tennessee Valley Church for their own summer arts performance – a joint children's & youth production of the musical Annie Jr. Twenty-five children and some supporting adults were in the cast. Perhaps 200 adults were in the audience. Early in the performance a man entered the back stage area carrying a guitar case. He proceeded through the waiting actors to step onto the stage. From his guitar case he took a semi-automatic shotgun. He pointed it into the audience. He fired once into shock and confusion. He fired again into movement, both away from and toward him. He fired a third time just before the nearest adults were able to get their hands on him and his gun, wrestle him to the ground and bury him in what we call a "dogpile." The police had already been called. Eight people had already been wounded

and were receiving care. Within minutes, however, one was dead. By the end of the day, a second was also dead. And the shooter was, and is, in jail awaiting trial.

And within that day, Unitarian Universalists, in ever growing circles, began to hear calls like Eric's to me, and to turn toward Knoxville. At a service there, one of several held within that week, our UU Association Southeast District Executive, Annette Marquis, said, "I can with say with confidence that there is not a Unitarian Universalist anywhere on this planet who did not feel this attack personally." I know we did here in Lincoln. My hope this morning though is that we can feel, personally, not just the attack. I want us also to feel our faith's response. And because our faith begins in affirming "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," I believe we might feel this response best by reaching a better understanding of the three persons whose nature and character this painful encounter brought most sharply into focus. Their names are Linda Kraeger, Greg McKendry and Jim David Adkisson.

Let's first try to understand Linda Kraeger. For many years Linda was a professor of philosophy at the University of North Texas in Denton. Over that time she entered into an extended collaboration with fellow UNT philosophy professor Joe Barnhart. They published two books together. And their relationship began to extend far beyond its professional dimension. It embraced their spouses, Duane Kraeger and Mary Ann Barnhart. When the Barnharts became primary caretakers for their grandchildren, it took those children in as well, with Linda and Duane becoming their surrogate aunt and uncle. It extended into both professors' retirement from active teaching. And then it reached a real testing point. Joe and Mary Ann decided that their grandchildren's sense of family would be further enriched if they moved to Knoxville, where their daughter Linda and Joe's brother Jack and wife Betty all lived. But they didn't want to lose their connection to Duane and Linda. Finally they decided to ask: Would the Kraegers like to consider moving to Knoxville as well? "Yes," Linda and Duane responded, they would. And they all did, a little over a year ago. And since both couples had been long-time members of the Denton UU Fellowship, once in Knoxville, they immediately took up active membership in the Westside UU Church.

So on that Sunday, watching those grandchildren perform from the front row on the left of the stage, sat Linda Kraeger - surrounded by Duane, Joe, Mary Ann, Jack, Betty, and Linda - all seven together. The first two shots fired that morning hit four of them. By that evening Linda's life had ended. Its loss to all that family, of course, is profound. But to find our faith's response to her loss, I'm going to ask you to hold in your mind what brought her to be there, in that front row, in the first place, please. I'll come back to it.

Let's next try to understand Greg McKendry. He was a chemical engineer and plant manager for Viskase Corporation. They make sausage casings. He grew up in Detroit, and he actually worked near Memphis and later near Chicago. But his wife Barbara was from Knoxville, and she ran a business there. So for years Greg commuted by air to his jobs from their home in Knoxville.

They had two children, a son and daughter, who are now grown and off on their own lives. Their long-time church membership was with the Tennessee Valley congregation. Greg served many years on the Social Action Committee, with a particular concern for the environment. He also took his turn as a church Trustee. Beyond that, Barbara and Greg became appreciated as members who could see church needs and step up to meet them. When the church needed a new refrigerator, Greg and Barbara pitched in. When it needed a new hot-water heater, they bought it. And then, this last spring, they saw an even bigger need. A teenage boy, Taylor, needed a foster home. Greg and Barbara decided they could provide that home.

So on that Sunday, while Taylor was backstage awaiting his cue for entry into the play, Greg was standing at the side of the stage serving as an usher. When the first two shots went into the audience, Greg rushed the shooter's side to get between him and the children. He took the third shot full in his chest. His life had ended even before the police arrived. His loss to Barbara, to his children, to Taylor, to his church, of course, is profound. But to find our faith's response to his loss, I'm going to ask you to hold in your mind what brought him to stand by that stage in the first place and to rush forward across it toward the shooter, please. Hold it next to what you now understand about why Linda was where she was. As I said, I'll come back to them both.

Let's last try to understand Jim David Adkisson. Early in life, he earned an associate's degree in mechanical engineering. He served in the army as a helicopter repairman. More recently he'd worked as a truck driver, when he could find work. He was married five times. One of those marriages lasted ten years, to a woman, Lisa, who attended the Tennessee Valley UU Church. Twelve years ago - as one of our southeast area ministers, Meg Barnhouse, remembers - Lisa brought Jim David to the summer camp we call SUUSI – the Southeast UU Summer Institute. I attended that camp as well during my years in the area. Jim David was known there as "Jabbo." And Meg recalls that Lisa loved Jabbo "fiercely," called him her "soul twin". For his part, says Meg, Jabbo came to camp "as his argumentative, gun-loving, right wing, liberal-blaming self, and he was argued with, of course. He was derided for being part of the Boy Scout organization and for his right-wing views. He felt disrespected and shunned." ("Love Can't Fix Everything" UU World. August 25, 2008).

That marriage ended eight years ago, when Lisa got a court order for police protection from Jabbo. She attested that he'd told her that one of his options was to blow her brains out and then his own. Neither Lisa nor Jabbo is known to have had any U.U. connections since. Newspaper reports say Jim David, Jabbo, lived quietly in a house 20 minutes from the Tennessee Valley Church. The shelves there hold such titles as Liberalism is a Mental Health Disorder, Let Freedom Ring, and The O'Reilly Factor, by radio and TV talk show hosts Michael Savage, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly. In July, Jim David received a letter from the state telling him his food stamp allotment would be reduced or eliminated. He wrote a four page letter. It hasn't been released to the public, but officials who've read it attest that it states Jim David's

- frustration over being unable to get a job,
- his hatred for liberals in general, as well as gays,

- his belief that all liberals should be killed because they are ruining the country,
- his decision to target the church because of its liberal teachings and
- his expectation that he would be shooting until the police stopped him.

On that Sunday, Jim David, Jabbo, packed 73 shotgun shells into his pockets. He drove his Ford Escape to the church. Leaving his letter inside on the front seat, he picked up his guitar case, shotgun inside, and entered the door behind the stage.

So now, with this understanding, what is our faith's response?

Perhaps you saw one response suggested in our own Lincoln Journal Star. Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts' column, published there, concluded by saying "Conservatives did not cause this bloodbath. Jim Adkisson allegedly did. But in telling him 'liberals' were the source of his every disaffection and woe, conservatives certainly validated the hatred and madness that drove him. It would be a fitting tribute to those who were lost in Knoxville if this tragedy gave (the conservative authors who cast themselves as righteous good combating the unholy evil of liberalism) cause for pause – and reflection."

Our faith in "acceptance of one another" and "encouragement to spiritual growth" would endorse that response. It is in fact a response very much in the same spirit as our minister Meg Barnhouse's. As Meg reflected on her arguments with Jabbo at SUUSI, she wrote, "We love to think of ourselves as open-minded, but it's hard for us to be open-minded toward certain people and their views. Maybe it's just me that has a hard time, but I think I'm not alone in this. . . . I do affirm the worth and dignity of every person, but I never promised to affirm the worth and dignity of every idea. Some ideas are oppressive and not well thought out. They lead to violence and injustice and really bad behavior. I try to argue with respect and kindness, but it's hard when the person you're talking to acts like a jerk. If I were the Dalai Lama or a UU saint, I would be able to, and I hope that will come in the future, but I am sure not there yet." ("Love Can't Fix Everything" UU World. August 25, 2008). As I see it, our faith in acceptance and spiritual growth would move us all, conservatives and liberals alike, closer to this ideal, however slowly and fitfully.

At the same time, as Meg says, "Our churches can't help or fix everyone. Living in a covenant community is hard work, and it necessitates our staying on our medication, by which I mean staying in as right a mind as is possible for us." I reflect that our faith also holds the goal of a peaceful world within which each individual pursues a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." That faith must hold Jim David Adkisson, must hold Jabbo, fully responsible for making his own "peace-building" response to his most egregious violation of this goal.

In the end though, I think our faith's best response is captured in those two understandings I've asked you to hold in your mind for these several minutes. I think it is to be found in the spirit of

Linda Kraeger and Greg McKendry, the spirit they shared, the spirit that brought each of them to be where they were when Jim David Adkisson violated his responsibility for peace and ended their lives.

Linda was in that seat right across from Jabbo's gun because two young children had come into her life through a friend, and she had decided to devote her love to helping raise those children. She'd moved across our country to extend her newly created family. She'd made into her family two children, their grandparents, two other aunts and an uncle, none of whom were hers by either blood or marriage.

And Greg. He was standing at the side of that stage because he'd reached out beyond the same boundaries. He'd enlarged his family to include Taylor. More than that, he'd extended his love to include all the other children in his church. His understanding of his family got infused into what almost always seems like a totally "risk-free" job, being our Sunday's usher. The reach of Greg's love understood that when risk was required to minimize the harm Jim David's gun could cause to this "family", he made sure he was the last person who would feel that harm.

As you may know, the Unitarian Universalist Association took out a full-page ad in the New York Times to proclaim our faith's response to our loss, some weeks ago. I think the header captured our response very well. It reads "Our Doors and Our Hearts Will Remain Open."

The pain we all feel at this loss can have a twin. I will call it pride. If you were here last spring, you might remember my speaking one Sunday of "positive pride." There is sinful pride, as many have taught us. That's the kind of pride that carries us, in our minds, "above" one other. But there is also a pride that leads us to salvation. This pride is the pride that leads us toward one another.

And now we have a powerful image for what such pride looks like. It's been given us by our "soul twins" in Knoxville, Tennessee. It is that "dogpile" that brought Jim David "Jabbo" Adkisson back to our shared earth.

*This church is not
a place of right convictions,
a fortress of truth
or even a bastion of philosophy.
The church is a community
of those who have suffered loss,
lived through it,
and learned true compassion.*

(Ed Harris)

May we, from these great teachers, now learn this lesson well.