

Requiem Sermon for the Baptists of Sutherland Springs, Texas

Kyle D. Potter

NT Reading: Revelation 21:2-7

Gospel: Matthew 2:13–18

We are gathered here to mourn, lament, and to pray for the dead after yet another mass shooting. As the Baptists of Sutherland Springs would say, “We have business with the Lord tonight.” We’re coming together before God’s altar with some heavy burdens on our shoulders. Some of us carry an aching grief for the sweet people who were just killed, and the for people who love them. Some of us feel helpless. I know that I just feel a cold rage, and I’m tempted to despair. Many of you know that I consider Baptist Christians to be my people in a special way. It was Baptists who told me about Jesus and first taught me to follow him. Baptist piety is a foundation stone in my life. I won’t speak for you, but I know that I have some prayers to pray here that are pretty loud, rude, and angry. That’s okay. God knows.

Tonight’s Bible readings compare the old world with the new one. The infant Jesus came into the old order of violence and grief. He narrowly escaped his first encounter with the power of the wicked. Dozens of boys in Bethlehem were collateral damage. Jesus grew up and grew strong, and preached Good News: Blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, and the pure of heart. He died and was raised and he changes the world by transforming the people in it. He healed us by the spilling of his blood, he washed us in baptism, and purifies our hearts by the fire of his Spirit. The Apostolic Church insisted that we are the heralds of God’s future. We’re Tomorrow People: woman and men of the new creation. Our destiny can be seen in the passage from Revelation, which we just heard read out. It doesn’t feel that way tonight, does it? The new Creation seems so far from us, when we can see that we’re so deeply mired in the old one. I don’t feel like a Tomorrow Person.

The Baptists of Sutherland Springs are dead, because a notoriously wicked man used the weapons available to him to kill a family member and the Christian congregation with whom she shared her life. And just as King Herod had his foot

soldiers, so do the wicked and violent men of our day. You can spot them, because they're the ones lying to us about what happened, what it means, and what we can and cannot do about it.

The first lie comes from the killer's own family: no one could see it coming. No. The man in question had a public and well-documented history of savage, criminal assault upon his romantic partners and their children.

The second lie comes from a Texas investigator, who declared that there was no evidence of a religious motive. No. It is not incidental that the murderer attacked his mother-in-law while she was offering worship and praise to God as a member of the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs. Those brothers and sisters were living as the Church in the most conspicuous way: gathered to worship God and to tell the truth of the Gospel. I have viewed recordings of their church services. They were a warm, working class people, who exercised their baptismal priesthood by proclaiming hope to addicts and feeding and clothing their neighbors. The pastor would insist in his sermons, "The number one thing we should do as Christians is follow Christ ... The Lord doesn't expect us to go out acting like Christians, but to *be Christians*.... We're called to go to those who need."

That's why I don't believe that the Baptists of Sutherland Springs were merely collateral damage to the Gun Cult — that this is the price of the American version of "freedom." That's a bigger lie still. But here's the truth: these Baptists are Tomorrow People. They were targeted because they brought signs of God's new creation within sight of someone who loved darkness and cultivated a life of violence. There are many thousands of such men in this country. The people who love darkness want us to believe that there's nothing we can do except to gather around the altar and pray for the dead. But this is a Christian Mass. It is a *sending*. We are part of Christ's royal priesthood. We won't only put our arms around each other; we'll put our heads together. I want to be one of the Tomorrow People. I want to learn ways in which I can put my body between victims and their victimizers. I want to talk about guns and domestic violence. I want to stand with people who take risks for others. I want to learn to spend my political and social

influence to proclaim God's truth to the powerful, and shout down the lies of wicked men.

It's with these hopes — the hopes of Tomorrow People — that we gather around the altar of God. We're angry. We're tempted to despair. We bring those hopes and this pain to one another. We don't hide it, but name it in the presence of God. We bring it all to the Lord, and unite it to Christ's sacrifice. We pray, "Jesus, help." We pray for the Baptists of Sutherland Springs, Texas. We pray for the dead, the wounded and the grieving.

"Remember them, O Lord. Give them rest. Bring them to completion. Come, Holy Spirit. Heal and comfort the damaged and bereaved."

But we don't stop there. Like our Baptist brothers and sisters who were killed for being the church so conspicuously, let's look for ways to stand between the violent and the weak. Let's look for ways to mitigate their power, and shatter their violent fantasies. Let's call the liars to repentance, and ask God to close their mouths. Let's tell the truth.

Kyle D. Potter

St. Mark's Church, Milwaukee

kyle.potter@gmail.com

8 November 2016