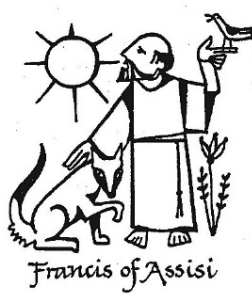


Dear friends in Christ



May 29, 2022, Ascension Sunday

“I Have Heard of Your Faith”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23;
Luke 24:44-53

This tumultuous week-that-was began inauspiciously. I opened the computer e-mail on Sunday evening to check if there were any pressing demands on my time, my money or my brain power. What I found was not some scam from a Nigerian prince with millions of looted wealth wanting to stash it in my bank account. No not that tired, old ruse – but the person or persons generating this scam were ensconced in Ireland. This was a ruse by Irish leprechauns.

Details could be had by clicking on a tab labeled: “Remittance Advice.” Regards. Yeah, regards, sucker if you click on that. The great sucking sound you hear won’t be the American jobs being siphoned off to Mexico that Ross Perot feared. No, it will be your hard-earned cash being vacuumed out of your bank account, along with your data and passwords being slurped out of your computer.

As the week progressed, it turned disastrous. We all discovered to our horror, the tragic events of another mass school shooting -- a far more deadly scam, that of the NRA and the gun lobby. Abetted by their willing political accomplices who prostitute themselves for the almighty campaign dollar.

This was pronounced the work of a “loner.” FALSE! This young man had plenty of accomplices – the self-serving idiots who mouth the idiocy: “It’s not guns that kill people. It’s people who kill people.” It’s politicians who put guns as a higher priority than our children. And those who vote for them. No, this murderer was NOT a loner. There were others.

These are the fifty Republicans who, in lock-step with Mitch McConnell, have blocked even the most tepid sensible gun safety laws. Throw in a batch of corrupt Democrats on the payroll of this death machinery, and nothing gets done.

Today, to a person, these esteemed representatives even blocked a bill to address domestic terrorism. Have another shot and pass the ammunition (oops, poor choice of words). Gotta support your local, neighborhood terrorist. He's one of us.

Columbine, Las Vegas, Tree of Life Synagogue, Sandy Hook, El Paso, Buffalo -- The list goes on over the decades until we have become inured to the carnage. We're numbed out. I never again want to hear some inane, insipid words about "thoughts and prayers." That's just a bunch of pious bull -- simpering NRA apologetics.

After each mass shooting, especially in schools, the cry goes up, "Surely they will do something now." Authorities couldn't even manage to send in police on the scene, gathered in the school hallway outside the besieged classrooms -- within earshot of those desperate 911 pleas from students in those classrooms.

"There are still eight of us alive. Please send in the police now!" Nothing. Nothing, as their classmates were gunned down and the classroom floor was awash in blood. As the survivors bled out. Over an hour and...Nothing.

We are scolded for raising this as a policy issue. For heaven's sake we shouldn't politicize this tragedy. Folks, it's politics that brought us this tragedy. The NRA and their accomplices have already politicized this issue. To deadly effect.

If you consider other nations demographically similar to ours -- we don't see Canadians massacring one another wholesale on a weekly basis. We don't see this level of violence in virtually any advanced European nation. NOT ALL OF THEM ADDED UP TOGETHER!

This doesn't have to be.

Folks, WE ARE NOT WITHOUT RESOURCES TO ACT. We celebrate one of the signal events in the Christian Story. No not Memorial Day, though we know that's upon us by all the mattress sales -- 40 percent off, lay away financing. Free delivery, and we'll take away your old one. FREE! All major credit cards accepted. Open till 9:00 tonight. Almost the same ad copy gun stores are using this weekend.

No, not that holiday. This Sunday we celebrate Ascension Day. It is as if LOVE exploded and has been let loose throughout the world. Jesus, as a physical presence, is taken from us that the Risen Christ might seep into every nook and cranny. Into every heart and mind. Empowering compassion, giving courage – yes, political courage, to do the right thing by our kids. By ourselves.

In groups of the Christ-infected followers, spontaneous works of mercy and daring acts of sacrifice and resistance erupt. It is in such a group at Ephesus that St. Paul finds hope and joyful fellowship. Not just potlucks, but actual, daring works of mercy and solidarity.

That is the work of the spirit of the living Christ, the reality that transcends the historical Jesus. He's gone, but Spirit-empowered, the church is launched.

As Luke tells the story, "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy..."

Now, don't get caught up in the strange particulars of this story. It's how folks remembered the events fifty or so years later. It's how folks told of such marvelous and incomprehensible events. The bottom line is: He's gone. But he's not.

Why are you still staring up into the clouds? THERE'S WORK TO DO.

He's no longer with us, but let loose in the cosmos – blessing, empowering, comforting, encouraging those who gather in his name. He's present in your hands and heart. In your minds and in your billfolds. Wherever you gather around his altar to remember him.

Paul finds such a group of the Christ-infected in Ephesus. He, himself, will travel throughout much of the Roman empire forming other such fellowships.

"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

"I have heard of your faith." Not only heard, but seen.

As I witnessed clumps and knots of grieving families comforting one another this evening, all that remains is the faith that, in love, somehow, we will get through

this together. That is Christ let loose in the valley of the deep shadow of death. Faith giving strength to hold one another up, to grieve, to pray together.

After the 2020 election, with Dr. Fauci no longer muzzled and under wraps, no longer under the censorious scowl of the Former Guy, we talked about “free-range Fauci.” Fauci let loose. Well, what we now celebrate on Ascension Sunday is “free-range Jesus.” The reality of Love unleashed upon creation, down through the ages, present most especially in hearts and imaginations of those who love him.

We had barely finished burying the victims of Buffalo when the catastrophe of Uvalde was upon us. One of stories from the Buffalo funerals captured my heart – that of “Mayor Kat,” Katherine Massey who was laid to rest only a Tuesday ago.

Mayor Kat was not prone to sit by idly and bemoan the state of affairs. Sick and tired of the overgrown lot on her street – state property, she had had it with excuses and inaction.

So, she sent a letter to the governor on letterhead of the “Cherry Street Block Club,” which did result in action. The lot was quickly cleaned up. Now, Massey was the only one who knew who wrote that letter. It was her own invention. And that invented club consisted of one sole member – her.

It was that sort of fearless activism which was her hallmark. Her congressman noted at her funeral, “She was the mayor in every neighborhood that she lived in.” Katherine Massey was one of ten shoppers taken from the Buffalo community by another teenage boy with an assault rifle.

She was an outrageously creative activist. To raise health awareness among students in her local neighborhood school, she showed up in a broccoli costume which she accessorized with leopard gloves and sunglasses to perform a rap song she wrote. She was the hit at the school’s assembly.¹ It was probably enough to have even gotten “W” to eat his broccoli.

“She considered herself a single parent with 35,000 adopted children attending Buffalo’s public schools.”²

She fulminated, through letters to the editor, against an escalating culture of gun violence in her city. That is the sense of mission and strength Mayor Kat drew from her family of faith at Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church.

¹ “Buffalo says Goodbye to ‘Mayor Kat,’” *Los Angeles Times*, Tuesday, May 24, 2022.

² Ibid.

Now, the whole world has heard of her faith and the faith of her community in Christ.

Mayor Kat was a splinter of that glory, a manifestation of the flesh and blood risen Jesus. Free Range, indeed. She is an incarnation of that Ascended Love, a Holy Busybody, God bless her.

As we mourn our losses, hold one another up, might we continue to take strength in the living Christ in our midst. The Christ in the faces of one another as we gather around this table in his precious memory. Not for solace only, but for strength. The strength that nurtured and empowered Mayor Kat. The strength that will get us all through this horrible week. Yes, we have heard of your faith

“In our Eucharistic meal we are pulled into immense love and joy for such constant and unearned grace...that explains the joyous character with which we celebrate this meal.”³

That is what sustains me -- to see the love in the faces of those who weekly gather here at the altar of Christ. Your faithfulness continues to give me hope. Yes, I have seen and heard of the faith of the saints gathered here in this northern outpost of Christ in San Bernardino. For us all at St. Francis, I say, “Thanks be to God.” Amen.

³ Richard Rohr, *Yes and No: Daily Meditations* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2013), 228.