

“Open Up...Family”
Isaiah 61:1-4, Luke 2:8-20
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In the long run, we have our brand new church sign! Have you checked it out at the front parking lot? It looks great. Especially because it is bright enough to be easily seen in the evening time. We can change words if necessary, sermon titles, and special event announcements at any time. Now the Trustees have put our Christmas Eve service time on it. We thank the Trustees for their hard and great work for the church. While I was reading CNN news articles, I happened to find an interesting church sign that caught my attention. It had some interesting words, “St. Francis in the Foothills United Methodist Church, tomorrow sermon is ‘Body Building’ Worship at 7:45 and 9:00 am”. People on the website made short comments, “People worship some strange stuff.”

It was silly, but that made me think for a second about the purpose of church. The church is called as a faith community and as one body, even though we are different, serving, encouraging, and building up one another in Christ. I am sure that when God gave us church, He must have had a very special mission. What do you think our mission is? Our church has joined the conference’s congregational renewal program, called *Pathway to Renewal*. At Pathway’s meeting, we had a great chance to share our ideas and thoughts on the purpose of the church. The two key words to understand the church were “family” and a “moral compass.” It is true that the church community should be an extended family presenting a moral compass to our community and to our society. What do you think about this mission?

We have heard horrible news about the mass shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. A 20-year old-man wearing combat clothing and armed with loaded guns killed 27 people-20 of them children (5 to 10 years old). Why did he target innocent little ones and take away little one’s innocent lives? The news report reminded us that this young man already shot his mother to death inside her home and drove his mother’s car to the school and slaughtered the children. Then he killed himself. We don’t know the whole story about his psychological and physical state of being. When I heard this news on Friday, I was working on my sermon, “Open Up...Family”. When I watched news, Emilie Parker (one of 20 victims)’s father was delivering his remarks. Can we imagine his pain and sorrow? I believe FBI and police will find out why or what has caused this horror, but I want to focus on “brokenness” among us and indescribable agony of the heartbroken from this horrible tragedy.

How does all of this affect our own understanding of the church family and our own family? Let's look at how today's Scripture readings can help us to deal with our deep sorrows and sadness around the horror. Our Old Testament reading shows us the New Messiah's work through the eyes of Isaiah. It is a long passage, but in short, it talks about God's new vision for his people, for saying, preaching good news to the poor, healing the heartbroken, and caring for the needs of all who mourn. What do you see here in the list of new Messianic promises?

In the New Testament reading, we have the story of Christ's birth. What insight does our story give to us? God sent His angel to shepherds in the fields, because God wanted to share this good news with them first. In Jesus' time, the shepherds were not visible or treated as a significant group, but they were seen as the "forgotten people." But in the Gospel of Luke, they were lifted up. Do we know why God appeared to them first? God cared for the marginalized, abandoned and for the heartbroken among us. These are the recipients of God's love. As a parent and pastor, when I heard of this tragic horror, I thought of parents who had lost their precious ones and prayed for their broken hearts. Why did God allow this evil thing to happen to them right before Christmas, "the most beautiful time of the year." My heart is broken. But I believe that God is crying and mourning for the parents and victims at this time. As in the Christmas story, God is still here for us and wants to reach out to us.

Today's Scripture readings remind us about a bigger picture of God's love, not only for his chosen people, but His love and mercy has no limit and boundary. He will accept the poor, the heartbroken and even the abandoned. Our new messiah will come and teach us about compassion, empathy and great feeling for others as an extended family in God. This is the essence and spirit of Christmas. This is why we are eagerly waiting for baby Jesus' coming in this season.

God calls us individually and as a congregation to new places to mission and witness. We are to witness God's love, compassion and concern. We are to witness the birth of Christ again, again and again. God must want us to restore family values, the sense of community, and the sense that we are all children of God. Think about the deepest, most enduring relationships you've experienced—with a parent, a spouse, a friend, or a child. If these are but a glimpse of the relationship God wants with you, what must that mean about God's love? In this case, the purpose of church and our ministry is continuing to share God's love and to expand our spiritual family to our neighbors, friends and the heartbroken.

Mass shootings challenge us in every way. The president was addressing the

nation and in his concluding address, he said, “We are going to have to come together to take meaningful action regardless of politics.” The expression, “meaningful action” still lingers in my mind. What does the church believe about taking “meaningful action”? If the church is a delegate of God’s special mission for the world, the church must be a special agent of God called for “meaningful action” to bring love, hope, joy and peace in the midst of evil. Let us keep these mission goals in our hearts and to live out our lives in our faith and actions. Amen.