

**May 29, 2022**  
**Numbers 6:22-27 / Acts 1:1-5, 8-11**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

**PLEASE NOTE:** *This is not a full sermon, just some introductory reflections on the scripture readings to help prompt small-group sharing as part of our Service of Lament – in the wake of recent mass shootings around the country.*

Our reading from Numbers is what's known as the *birkat kohanim*, as we explored last week – the Jewish priestly blessing, the so-called Aaronic blessing because it's how God told Moses to tell his brother, Aaron, the priest, to bless the Israelites.

“(God) bless you and keep you; (God) make (God's) face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; (God) lift up (God's) countenance upon you and give you peace.”

It's a blessing of shalom, of deep peace even in the midst of profound grief, suffering, chaos, uncertainty, violence.

And it's echoed, as we also talked about last week, in one of Jesus' “farewell” blessings to his disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

A blessing, again, carrying with it the possibility of peace WITHIN, shalom, even when there is not peace WITHOUT.

In the reading from Acts, this story of Jesus' ascension and final affirmation to his followers that the divine Spirit will remain with them when he's no longer with them in the flesh, I was particularly struck by the reaction of his followers. In light of our collective grief in the wake of recent mass shootings.

“While he was going,” we're told, they gaze up toward heaven and two angels appear and ask them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

That, in many ways, seems to capture our human instinct when we are overwhelmed with the weight of loss and grief. Looking up to heaven is a metaphor.

When we experience loss, individually or collectively, directly or vicariously, especially loss on top of loss, trauma on top of trauma, to look up to heaven is to wish away the loss, hoping against hope to undo the loss. To somehow bring back that which was lost, to bring back those who were lost.

We look up to heaven because we can't bear to fix our eyes and our attention on the earth that suddenly feels so profoundly defined by grief and loss. By absence. By the hollow spaces left inside us and around us.

Or we look up to heaven, perhaps, longing for life to look and feel on earth as we imagine it does in heaven, as the prayer goes. Heaven, itself, a metaphor for life as God intends, a place of abundance. And a place of eternal peace. If only.

We know the instinct. We know the feeling. It's SO easy to feel overwhelmed, afraid, even defeated, just WITNESSING the violence and terror and trauma in the world around us. Never mind the devastating impact on those who have EXPERIENCED such violence and terror and trauma in their own lives, and in many cases, continue to – within a national context that minister, author and cultural critic Danté Stewart calls the “centuries-long feedback loop of American violence.”

But within a holistic understanding of our God-given selves, we know that we can't ultimately know peace – individually OR collectively – by denying our grief, our righteous anger and rage, whatever it is that we're feeling.

Rev. Naomi reminded us a couple of weeks ago that that the church itself is long guilty of theologizing and faithing and false-comforting away the full experience of our grief and our rage. We are meant to feel what we feel. We need to. We need to share it. We need to stay connected to each other through it.

It's easy to get stuck in it, to become numb, but the blessing of *birkat kohanim* and the blessing of peace, shalom, Jesus offers to his disciples is blessing that carries with it a rolling invitation, a life-affirming, life-giving necessity, not just to resist the brokenness we witness or experience, but to help create something new out of it. To repair and to restore. Tikkun olam. To bring peace.

Danté Stewart was interviewed this past week on National Public Radio – based on an essay he wrote in response to the mass shootings in Buffalo and Texas, asserting that such dark days require deep love. Asserting that we have to hold onto our humanity when the world tries to take it away. That we cannot let ourselves and each other go numb, or at least stay numb, if we have any hope of creating a better world, a more just and peaceful world. Heaven on earth.

Speaking specifically to Black folks within the ongoing, traumatic legacy of violent, white supremacy racism, but casting the lesson to all humanity, he writes, “We hold grief. We know terror. But we also know the love that refuses to let this racist world have every part of us. And it is our job to hold it, love it, protect it and honor it so that it doesn’t grow cold under the weight of the world. Whatever part that is in your hand and in your mind and on your lips, protect it. Do whatever you must to feel again, to remember the dead, to fight for the living, to not let their suffering or your own be in vain or erased.”

In a similar vein, Jamie Anderson writes, “Grief . . . is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give, but cannot. All of that unspent love gathers in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in the hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go.”

The divine blessing of peace, of shalom, is meant to hold space within each of us, and nurture space between and among us in community, IN COMMUNITY, where such love can find a place to go. To cast out fear and continue to grow, even in the face of horrific violence and heartbreaking loss. To bring peace to a broken world.