

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 16, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

On Assassins

Well, once again, this nation has been shocked and surprised by the work of an assassin. Once again, we are struggling to figure out how such a thing could have happened. We look for an explanation, we search for someone or something to blame, we try to make sense of a senseless action that killed and wounded random, innocent people. Did overheated political rhetoric lead to political violence or are we simply talking about a mentally deranged individual who acted in total isolation? While I'm sure that you have heard a lot of opinions and read lots of commentary about last week's shooting in Tucson, Arizona we, specifically as Christians, have to ask our own questions and seek our own answers. If we know anything from our scripture and traditions, we know that the Gospel of Jesus teaches that God is always able to weave something good out of the most evil yarn. Even a despicable and revolting action such as this can, we believe, be turned by God's love into some positive good. So, this morning, I want to share with you some thoughts about what earthly good could possibly come out of this latest national tragedy.

I wonder if you have been curious enough to launch your computer's Google search engine or go to your dictionary to look up the word "assassin." Before we go any further let's make sure we know what an assassin really is. It's a word that enters the English language through Arabic and it means, literally, "a Hashish eater." Now, as we all know, hashish refers to the top leaves of the Indian hemp plant. When it is smoked or chewed it produces a very powerful intoxicating effect. Hashish came to be used as the name of a Mohammedan secret society existing at the time of the Crusades. Members of the Hashishin, under the influence of that narcotic, committed strategic secret murders on behalf of their tribal rulers. So, from the very beginning, the word "assassin" has been applied to a murder carried out in an altered state of mind. That probably doesn't surprise you, since we have accounts of an individual who was alienated, psychotic, deranged, or demented. Such terms may be more or less accurate but they're not very helpful. I'm sure we could all readily agree that a sane and rational human being could not commit such actions unless under some abnormal influence—a drug, a disease, a defect of some sort.

What do you think was the narcotic influence controlling this particular assassin? Will we ever know? I believe that we can. Even if we didn't already know the identity and background of the shooter or the reason he chose to carry out his murders there is a drug that accounts for what happened to all those innocent victims. That same drug would cause a right-wing fanatic to pull the trigger. The same narcotic would have served for a left wing Marxist or a drug dealer in Mexico. It would account for the violence of a white racist or a black Muslim, a Taliban terrorist, or an African death squad. The drug that I'm talking about is not hashish but it's just as powerful. It's called by a variety of names. We know it as fear, hate, intolerance, isolation, rejection, prejudice, or anger. That's the drug that killed and wounded all those people in Tucson, Arizona.

I'm sure you're aware that there are vast quantities of this powerful drug readily available in this country of ours. We are able to limit and control its availability to some extent. Usually after an outbreak such as the slaughter of this past week there follows a time of relative calm and abstinence. It would be a wonderfully positive outcome if this latest violence would make all of us come to our senses and realize that something has to be done to get that drug off the streets. But, then, I don't really believe that's going to happen. We're far too addicted as a society to go "cold turkey," I'm sure.

What I'm suggesting is that our worldwide addiction to hate and fear and persecution is with us and likely to remain so. In our racially discriminatory and hurtful language, our social divisions, our restrictive regulations, and our raising of children to believe that all people are divided into "us" and "them" we have all contributed to the supply of that drug to which we are so addicted. Whether we have simply failed to speak a word of love when it was needed, resisted reaching out to someone who is lonely and depressed, not confronting a wrong but choosing to look the other way—let's face it, we are part of this insidious drug culture that winds up destroying innocent lives.

Now, here is where our Faith provides us, right in the midst of our sorrow and despair, with an important insight: The drug that I've been describing, the drug that turns people against people and senselessly destroys millions around the world, has a proven antidote. The antidote for the drug of hatred, fear, prejudice, and violence is its exact opposite. Its name is Love. Love is the only thing that can eradicate the scourge of this drug to which we're addicted. Only love can remove the weapons from our hands and from our mouths. And love is what our Faith is all about. Love God and love your neighbor. This is the antidote and this is the prescription.

If you want to respond in some way to what happened in Arizona don't send flowers or write a heated letter to the Editor. Don't start a fund to erect a stone monument. The greatest memorial and the best possible outcome would be for each one of us to look inward, to come to our senses and to be accountable for the subtle, everyday ways in which we have allowed the supply of the drug of hatred and separation to grow daily—to spread its evil influence to every heart and mind. What we need to do is to get that drug off the streets. How? Do something direct and positive. Find someone that you are alienated from, someone you consider "beneath you," a person you have dismissed and disrespected. Only you know where you most lack love, justice, or compassion. Tell that other person that you don't necessarily agree with or admire him but you don't hate him. Tell that person that you're not going to contribute any longer to the spread of an influence that can lead to a nine year old child being gunned down for no reason. We have a special vocation as Christians to act on this urgently important mission. We need to begin with ourselves and reach out, one by one, to get rid of whatever supply of ignorance, selfishness, arrogance, and hatred that we have accumulated or shared with others. What's the alternative? It is that the whole world will eventually become a place of roaming assassins, a whole planet populated with hate-eaters. That's precisely where we are headed unless we let go of our dangerous and self-destructive addiction.

Here's my thought about what we need to do in light of this most recent outbreak of senseless and uncontrolled violence: **First** recognize who or what it was that killed and wounded those folks, regardless of the identity of that young man who pulled the trigger. He is a man shaped and formed by a worldwide culture that everyday drugs people with suspicion, paranoia, overheated language, and media-exalted violence. In the influence of that drug he became an assassin. **Secondly**, we need to recognize that we ourselves have tolerated and even been the carriers of that drug. In all honesty, not one of us is without guilt. **Finally**, we have to make up our minds to STOP our involvement. By taking the antidote of love, we will be enabled to reach out across all the artificial barriers we have created, to be reconciled to all those "others" who are actually our sisters and brothers in Christ.

In closing, let me share with you something that was intended to be said by John F. Kennedy, himself a victim of the weapon of the drug called hatred, from his speech prepared but undelivered in Dallas that fateful day. He called upon this nation to "exercise its strength with wisdom and restraint...that we may achieve in our time, and for all time, the ancient wisdom of peace on earth and goodwill toward men." That has to, increasingly, become our goal if we care to change to climate, to stop the spread of violence and death, and to turn this world toward our Creator's will of becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. Think about it.