

What NOT to say After the Virginia Tech Massacre

Colleagues,

This is an open letter to William King, ELCA Campus Pastor at Virginia Tech. According to the ELCA news release—copied below—King spoke “the Christian message” at the campus convocation the day after the massacre. Not clear, but not unlikely, there were other voices offering the “X” message from their faith communities. The text of King’s Christian message is copied below from the news release. The Audio of King’s message is available at <http://media.ELCA.org/audionews/070417.mp3>

ELCA NEWS SERVICE

April 17, 2007

ELCA Pastor Delivers Christian Message at Virginia Tech Convocation

CHICAGO (ELCA) – The Rev. William H. King, Lutheran campus pastor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, Va., and staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), delivered the Christian message April 17 at the Virginia Tech Convocation where students, faculty and others of the community gathered to remember the victims of yesterday’s shooting on campus. According to the Virginia Tech Web site, at least 33 people died including the gunman.

“We’re gathered this afternoon for many purposes. To weep for lost friends and families, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, to embrace hope in the shadow of despair, to join our voices and our longing for peace, healing and understanding which is much greater than any

single faith community, to embrace that which unifies, and to reject the seductive temptation to hate,” said King, who also serves as deployed staff of the Department for Campus Ministry, ELCA Vocation and Education.

“We gather together weeping, yes, we weep with an agony too deep for words and sighs that are inexpressible, but also we gather affirming the sovereignty of life over death. At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our simple joys, joys as simple as playing Frisbee on the Drill Field. We struggle to imagine a future beyond this agony. If we ever harbored any illusions that our campus is an idyllic refuge from the violence of the rest the world, they are gone forever. And yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love cannot be defeated. Amid all our pain, we confess that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it,” said King.

[Added at this point from the audio– “We cannot do everything, but we can do something. We cannot banish all darkness, but we can by joining together push it back.”]

“We cannot undo yesterday’s tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn as they seek for a way forward. As we share light one with another, we reclaim our campus. Let us deny death’s power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech, this our community. Let us cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair,” said King, who invited the convocation to a moment of silence.

Dear Pastor King,

I’d say you blew it.

It may be that you did indeed say more than the publicized words

we got in the ELCA news release—and from the audio they sent us to. But did you notice? Neither the word God nor the word Christ ever appears. So how can that be THE Christian message for the survivors? Whose side are you on?

The Good News you offered (unless there was stuff edited out of your prose) is not even good Judaism or Islam.

But what was the good news you offered? I ask you to read your own prose again and then articulate for yourself—and for us—just what it was that you offered the folks. Especially if you were billed as THE Christian spokesman. Here's what I see:

A. Your diagnosis of the survivors in their dilemma: "weeping . . . mourning . . . shadow of despair . . . agony too deep for words . . . sighs inexpressible . . . darkness of evil seems powerful indeed . . . casts a pall (even over frisbee-playing) . . . we struggle . . . illusions about our idyllic campus are gone.

B. Where you sought to bring these folks: to walk forward . . . to embrace hope . . . to join our voices & our longing for peace, healing and understanding . . . to embrace that which unifies . . . to reject seductive temptations to hate. . . affirm the sovereignty of life over death. . . to imagine a future beyond this agony . . . to push back darkness.

C. The power to get them from A to B:

We come to this place to testify that the light of love cannot be defeated

We confess that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it

We cannot do everything, but we can do something

We cannot banish all darkness, but we can by joining together push it back

We cannot undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit

in patient silence with those who mourn
As we share light one with another, we reclaim our campus
Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have
loved about Virginia Tech
Let us cast our lot with hope in defiance of despair
Inviting the convocation to a moment of silence

Sounds like the Saviors vis-a-vis that horrendous dilemma are the survivors: "We can... Let us."

If you were actually asked to be THE Christian voice on the program, why did you fudge? Someone apparently wanted something explicitly Christian. And just 9 days after Easter you still must have had something left over that you could have spoken. If the program people just wanted you to proclaim the Gospel of American Pelagianism—"by our bootstraps WE can DO it!"—which I think you proposed, then you might have simply said: "Thanks, but no thanks. Not my job. My ordination vow commits me to a different Gospel. Can't do it."

One reason the Gospel of American Pelagianism "fits" in the paradigm you propose is that it can indeed bring folks from their "A" dilemma as you diagnose it to the restored "B" place you offer. It goes like this: (A) Folks are horrifically torn apart. Smashed humpty-dumpties. But not so smashed that the pieces can't be put together again. And in your (B) goal-articulations you portray these smashed folks restored—doubtless with the eggshell fracture lines still patent here and there—but "whole" again. And the energy/power for that is our own resources. Broken eggs can self-restore. You tell us, "We can, we can, we can . . ."

Theologically analyzed there really wasn't a TOTAL eggshell smash, for there are resources left in the fragments that your "homily" calls upon to put humpty-dumpty back together again. Substantively that's really why Christ and his Good Friday and

Easter were NOT necessary for you to bring into your message and bring your message to closure. I.e., your diagnosis of the dilemma was too shallow. Ala St. Paul, there was no “stinger” left in the death you portrayed. With death already stingerless, WE survivors can cope with the aftermath. ‘Course what about the 33 folks for whom death’s sting on Monday was lethal?

Dunno what seminary you attended, but the profs surely made it perfectly clear that vis-a-vis death –“in the Christian message”– there is nothing “WE” can do to cope with it. At least nothing that WE (unassisted) can do to cope with it. That pertains both to our own death and to the death of others.

First of all in that authentic Christian message death is understood as an encounter with the original LIFE-giver. A negative encounter. A terminal encounter. Read the opening verses of Psalm 90 for the full grim specs. Paul summarizes Psalm 90 in those classic lines in I Corinthians 15 about death (last enemy), sin (the stinger) and God’s law (the “dynamis” [dynamite] that connects the first two).

If death is indeed an encounter with God’s dynamite (whether folks acknowledge it or not changes nothing about the fact) and the divine dynamite is against us, then we need an even better dynamite to cope with it. Like Someone who has somehow already licked the death-law-sin syndrome. Our own bootstraps just won’t do it. We CAN’T.

Ditto for your call “Let us deny death’s power.” You’ve got to be kidding, though you patently are not. Everyone of these folks you urge to deny death’s power is going to die. So who’s got power over whom? Who speaks the final “no” over whom? The last enemy has the last word—in not with a bang, then with a whimper. All this—according to the Christian message—part from Christ being in the mix. And since Christ is significant by his real

absence in your message, you are deceiving your hearers. To say nothing of what you are doing with your original ordination vow as a Christian pastor.

Ditto for “we gather affirming the sovereignty of life over death.” Apart from a Christ-connection that’s pure B.S.

Here’s some more: “our longing for peace, healing and understanding which is much greater than any single faith community, to embrace that which unifies.” What is that reality which is “greater than any single faith community . . .that unifies”? Is it greater than the Christian Gospel of the faith community on whose behalf you were speaking? And how so does that whatever-it-is “unify?” Better you would have said that the sin-death-law syndrome is the REAL unifier for all the offspring of Eve and Adam. The Lutheran Confessions to which you are pledged make that claim.

And aren’t you fudging here too? “Amid all our pain, we confess that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” If you are going to cite St. John’s gospel prose, then you have to name the light in order not to deceive your hearers. When we ask, “Just what is that Light, pastor?” you “testify that the light of love cannot be defeated.” That is an “other Gospel” – and you must know that– an alternate light to the Light you are referencing in the citation from John.

Enough for now. Except for this.

Only at one place do you speak of who/what was on the scene as the murderer rampaged. You speak of “the darkness of evil.” Once more, seems to me, you are closing out the God factor, God as actor in the carnage. As grim as that may seem at first, it has explicit Biblical precedents. Starting with Jesus himself when

the folks asked about the death of innocent folks at the Siloam tower collapse and Pilate's bloody massacre of Jews at worship to boot. Check it out in Luke 13, first paragraph. Jesus told the survivors—also crushed and humpty-dumptyed—to see the carnage for what it was. Of all things, a call for the survivors to repent. It would've taken some chutzpah on your part to do likewise, but isn't that "the Christian message?" It comes straight from the Chief. It's must be right. Yes, it's not his last word, as I trust you know. But without that penultimate word, Christ's ultimate word of gospel, of promissory mercy, is ho-hum.

[I won't go into the larger context, but someone should. This "suicide murderer" at Virginia Tech sounds parallel to the umpteen "suicide-bombers" that our liberation of Iraq has unleashed on those now-oppressed-again Iraqis. Sure they are all (relatively) innocent. In both places. Yet who runs the "balance of payments" in world history? Who was it that said this? – "Vengeance is mine. I run the pay-back system (also for nations)."]

It's not that repentance is a requirement, a "you gotta" before Christ's Easter conquest of the sin-death-law syndrome will benefit you. Rather it's that if you don't see your own God-problem, if you don't fess up and say "I too must turn around" when death strikes (either you or others), then the God-solution at Easter will be but an idle tale.

Pastor King, I will welcome and post to the Crossings community any response you may wish to send my way.

The gist of my grumblings above is this: You had a better Gospel for April 17 delivery. To wit, the Christian message. You should have used it. The folks needed to hear it. They still do. Use your campus pastor post to keep messaging that message. That's

the real Good News for all of us to hear in order to cope with
the Virginia massacre.

Peace and Joy!

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