

During the long season of Pentecost our readings from Scripture tend to focus on Jesus's life and teachings and how we ought to live as Christians. The commentaries I consult as I do my Bible Study on the weekly readings frequently comment on just how counter-cultural living the Christian life was in the very early church. 21 centuries later, this is hard to imagine in a first world nation that believes itself to be founded on Christian principles. How can it be possible that it is counter-cultural to live as a Christian in America today? After all, there is much about American culture to be admired and celebrated. I, for one, am deeply grateful that America is my home - particularly after I worked for a brief period in Lithuania and Belorussia shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. In America, I don't have to worry about who I associate with or expressing my political beliefs or worry that my government is manipulating my behavior by controlling the food supply. My education and standard of living is greater than most of my English relatives and certainly so for much of the world. My own understanding of living out my faith is that to whom much has been given, much has been expected and I find that most of my friends, associates and colleagues share this view. My day to day life as a privileged, middle-class, middled-aged, white American woman seems to

be in step with a Christian way of life. Until something like the horrific shooting and murder on live television happens, a shooting that lives on in various social media platforms, and I wonder if somehow I am contributed in this terrible event either by something I did by being complicit with white privilege or failed to do, like stronger advocacy on behalf of mental health care.

When something that awful happens, we want to know “why?” We need an explanation, if only to assure ourselves that the event was an aberration and, we hope, really has nothing to do with us. Well, an explanation has appeared in Thursday edition of the *Washington Post*, as reported by Sarah Kaplan. Earlier this week, at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Criminologist Adam Lankford presented a paper on how American culture contributes to mass shootings. He finds the principal culprit to be “the false promise of the American dream, which guarantees a level of success that can’t always be achieved through hard work and sheer willpower; the devotion to individualism and the desire for fame or notoriety.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/08/27/american-exceptionalism-and-the-exceptionally-american-problem-of-mass-shootings/>

I've done enough other reading to know that the American Dream still holds promise because it holds true for a statistically significant portion of our population, particularly if one happens to be "white". If my memory serves me correctly, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that the millennial generation will be the first that, as a group, will not be economically better off than their parents. How then, do we de-construct the American Dream and offer a compelling, alternative vision? Particularly a Christian vision?

I don't pretend to have a complete answer or even a fully thought out answer. I do think that we as a parish community can think about it and explore options. I further think that our Epistle today, coupled with our Gospel points to that alternative. So how might James point to a course correction for the American Dream? First, he would point out that all Christians receive God's goodness and generosity equally<sup>2</sup> and that the all those things that make Americans believe that we are exceptional, with our emphasis on individualism and a destiny for wealth and/or fame is false in God's economy. James would also say that we as Christians can reflect God's goodness and generosity by our truthfulness, humility, gratitude, patience, steadfastness and our own generosity to those who depend upon

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<sup>2</sup> Haruko Nawata Ward, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Volume 4*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009, 14.

us.<sup>3</sup> Finally, James would say that Christians would be personally above reproach and committed to social justice, just like our Lord. I'm certain that James would be as horrified as we are at the actions of the shooter and would point out the obvious in that destructive acts can NEVER be a means for illuminating God's presence or making room for divine goodness in our lives.

In our Gospel, Jesus is pointing out that what's in our heart, what our motivations are, are more important than rigid adherence to religious observance. Religious rituals and other observances are meant to bring us closer to God and to each other. If they serve as a source of judgment or as a device to shame, they do neither. Certainly each of us is guilty of at least one of the behaviors that "defile" a person - and in that catch all list, the defiling behaviors are all behaviors that put our individual needs and desires above that of another person. The opposite of many of these behaviors, such as fidelity, thrift, goodness, transparency, morality, gratitude, humility and a sense of purpose are those behaviors that seek the well being of another, not at the expense of self but in addition to one's self.

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<sup>3</sup> A.K. A. Adam, [www.WorkingPreacher.org/commentary\\_id=2605](http://www.WorkingPreacher.org/commentary_id=2605)

Perhaps the teaching of our churches should explicitly point out that the American Dream is a mere shadow of what God wants for us. God has begun unveiling a kingdom, where death and sin cannot prevail. God is providing us a kingdom that like the portion we read in Song of Solomon, is in agreement with the goodness of God's creation, there is passion and desire for one another. God's kingdom is more than just a dream. The point of life is not how much we can acquire, whether in accolades or in wealth, it is how much we love. It isn't about getting ahead, its about a life of meaning, lived as God wants us to live.

The events this week in the Shenandoah Valley [and the more horrific finding of dead migrants in Austria] lets us know that evil still exists - yet our Christian hope and promise is that it will not triumph. Each one of us can make a difference, and we ARE making a difference in the lives of others - we as a community are DOERS of the Word. For that, let us gave thanks to God.

Amen.