

## Naming the Pain, Speaking of Hope: Considerations for Religious Address in Time of Crisis

*William H. King, Lutheran Campus Pastor, Virginia Tech*

On April 16, 2007 Virginia Tech experienced agony too excruciating for words. Thirty-Three of our students and faculty died in the worst incident of school violence in United States' history. The next day, four hours before the university's convocation to gather the community in corporate mourning and solidarity, I was asked to speak for two minutes at that event. Since that time I have received many kind words of affirmation and support for my efforts. I have also been called "cowardly," "a disappointment," and an "American Pelagian." One e-mail asked, "Are you a Christian?" and another suggested that Bishop Hanson should fire me because I yielded to "political correctness."

Amid the hundreds of e-mails I received, one from the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* invited me to reflect on the resources in Scripture, the Lutheran tradition, and my faith life which were helpful in crafting my remarks. This essay is not intended to be so much a defense of those remarks as an exploration of the choices one makes in crafting comments on such an occasion. I hope it will help others asked to speak at events similar to the university convocation which followed the Tech shootings.

In deciding what I might say I considered the context in which I would be speaking. Theologians wiser than I note that what we say needs to be tailored to the audience to which we are speaking, not because we are willing to water down the gospel in order to make it palatable to a skeptical culture, but because we want our words to get a hearing and have an impact.

The importance of context is not limited to religious communication. Go to the campus of any large research university such as Virginia Tech and you will hear students talk about professors who are world renowned—but unable or unwilling to speak in language which is comprehensible to the undergraduates they teach. By their words, such professors communicate that a "truth" or body of knowledge is more important than the students with whose education they have been entrusted. Language appropriate for graduate students who have familiarity with the concepts of a discipline is different from what is appropriate for those who do not know the jargon. In the classroom or on the podium, attention to the needs and capabilities of our audience is one way we demonstrate our valuing of those we address.

You will note that in the above paragraph I spoke of "religious communication" rather than preaching because that broad phrase suggests the determination which a speaker has to make: "Am I being called to preach or am I to speak out of the wisdom, values, and core convictions of my faith? There is a difference between speaking *to* those of the community of faith, offering them the resources and implications of their community, as it encounters an event like the Tech shootings, and speaking *out of* that tradition, to those who do not share the language and the beliefs of the Church. The two are related but different. Phrased in more traditional theological terms it is the difference between the kerygmatic and apologetic tasks. A speaker must determine whether the immediate task is more acutely proclamation or translation of the faith into a form which can give strength and comfort to those unfamiliar with the language of the Church

In the days following our tragedy, as our community of faith gathered in worship, I attempted to speak with clarity of the hope which is within me due to the resurrection. I invited the persons who gathered at those times to ponder the cross and its eloquent witness to God's

paradoxical way of dealing with evil by sharing it and passing through it. I judged *that* to be the time for proclamation, not at the convocation in Cassell Coliseum.

There are those who believe that every moment is the kairoic time to proclaim the Word in the unequivocal language of church doctrine. I think my critics would be united in that conviction and view my choice not to preach as the source of their dismay with me. I respect their belief but am convinced that there are times when preaching, like force feeding someone who can not swallow, is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. I understand their concerns, and share their disdain of generic religion. Indeed, I do not find most ecumenical worship services on college campuses terribly nurturing precisely because they are so often designed to a least common denominator so as to say nothing in particular. But there are exceptional times with exceptional demands when one does participate in corporate events.

I was asked to speak at such an event as the Christian representative. In taking up that burden I was mindful that a friend in the administration, whom I deeply respect, had trusted me with a very difficult task. Part of my pastoral care for him was to execute that task with integrity. I did not receive a microphone to use in any manner I chose, but a request that I draw on the resources of my tradition to comfort a diverse community. Many were Christian, but many were not—yet all were hurting. I viewed the task less as proclamation to the faithful as pastoral care for the whole university community. In avoiding language which could be deemed sectarian I was not constrained by “political correctness” (either personal or imposed by the university). I was merely trying to create a hospitable atmosphere for all who gathered in need of comfort.

It seems to me that anyone called to speak in these post-9/11 days to gatherings such as the Tech convocation must be mindful of the deep nativist streak which runs through American history. The stranger has always been suspect. That is especially true when the stranger is a person of non-European extraction who does not share the dominant, usually triumphalistic religion of the society. It takes little courage or particular skill to speak words which will find favor with those who share your faith. Yet it is the responsibility and the opportunity of those who speak for the culturally dominant Christian faith to create hospitable space for all in a community such as the university.

As I began to think about speaking at the convocation I drew strength from the call stories of Scripture. In those narratives the call comes unsought to one who would prefer that someone else be chosen for the honor. Invariably the one called reacts with fear and expresses a crushing sense of inadequacy. But God promises that there will be resources sufficient for the task. That is the story I and all who have ministered at Tech have lived since the tragedy. We are keenly aware that we, like Moses, are not particularly eloquent, nor, even with our seminary degrees, any more ready than Amos the dresser of sycamores to accept the monumental task given to us. Well-oiled denominational procedures may give us the illusion that we pick our call. The reality is that the most important work we do is often thrust upon us unbidden. Yet God is faithful. To this I can attest.

Considering what to say in my brief two minutes, I thought about a lesson from the book of Job. That book is the Bible’s most extended wrestling with the mystery of incomprehensible, pointless, “how-can-a-loving-God-who-cares-one-iota-about-humanity-allow-such-absurdity” pain. It spills oceans of ink in trying to come to terms with the inexplicable. I remember reading the comments of a great Old Testament scholar who noted that after Job’s life falls apart, his

three friends came “and they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great [2:13, RSV].” The scholar (I’d like to make a proper attribution, but I have forgotten the source) notes, “And that is the last thing they do right in the whole book.” The rest of the way they offer long-winded explanations of Job’s agony. They blame Job. They defend God. They try to tie up the loose ends that make no sense. They leave Job hurting. The temptation to offer glib platitudes is almost irresistible when suffering is as absurd as the Virginia Tech massacre. We grasp for well worn phrases, as much to relieve our own discomfort as that of our hearers. But a word without honesty about the limits of its resonance rings hollow.

In framing my brief remarks I had two goals. First, I wanted to name the pain of those gathered. Second, I sought to offer a word of hope which could be received by both Christians and those who do not presently confess the Name. The mark of great art is that it makes us say, “Yes, that’s it! I sensed it. I knew it to be true, but I could not quite say it.” Good writing, whether a homily or a poem, gives us words for experiences and feelings which have defied expression. Good writing is honest about the reality it describes and helps us see that reality in a broader, deeper context.

From a purely rhetorical point of view I wanted to establish rapport with the “congregation” so that they would give me a hearing. But more important, I thought it crucial to name and acknowledge the suffering felt by those assembled. A sermon which refuses to acknowledge the dereliction of Good Friday in order too quickly to arrive at Easter is a sermon which does not touch the world where people live a normal day, much less one of ghastly horror. So I spoke of mourning dead friends, the loss of innocence, common longings which transcend doctrine, the difficulty of imagining a future beyond pain, and the very real temptation to hate. I live in this community. This is my home. More than a pastor to the community of Virginia Tech, I am a fellow sufferer. I named what I knew were the feelings of the community because they are my own.

In *The Cross in Our Context* Douglas John Hall eloquently argues that theology must do business with suffering if it is to have anything worth hearing. The church must be a community immersed in suffering because the world is immersed in it. In order to have credibility with a society which is no longer Christendom, we must not pretend that our tightly crafted formulations encompass the mystery of pain and thus preclude the need to sit in virtual silence for long hours with those whose suffering is very great.

Few have argued with the diagnosis in my remarks, most of the vitriol has been over my perceived timidity in offering a gospel cure. I say “cure” because that seems to be the assumption of some, that several specific words such as “God” “Jesus” or “the Holy Trinity” could have functioned as an incantation to banish the hurt of the assembly. I am sure if I had used the words on their short list my critics would have felt better, but I am not sure about the sufferers in the convocation.

It is true that I do not use “God” or “Jesus” in my remarks; perhaps I should have. However, I thought Christ clearly manifest in “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” In John’s soaring prologue we find some of the highest Christology in the New Testament. To quote from it was, in my thinking, clearly to evoke the thrust of that passage, and indeed the whole theology of John’s gospel: God’s paradoxical power is revealed on the cross. God is found at the place of suffering. God in Christ chooses to share the darkness

of the world, but is not finally defeated by it. I suspect John would be surprised to have his theology disparaged as “secular humanism.”

The real issue here is how explicit one needs to be when offering the hope of the gospel to a diverse community. Again, for me the issue of context was crucial. I judged that in Blacksburg, Virginia a significant number of the Christians in this conservative Evangelical stronghold would “know their Bible,” and that hearing the Johannine confession would evoke a wealth of religious resources for them. The power of metaphor is that it invites the hearer to connect to a broader tradition and wisdom, in this case, to biblical stories and passages unspoken.

At the same time, “the light shines the darkness” draws on a much broader doctrine of the Word of God. God speaks and the darkness is scattered. God speaks and the chaos recedes. The mystics of the Christian tradition speak of God constantly speaking the world into existence in every moment. I judged that even those who do not affirm the Christological significance of the light metaphor could draw strength and hope from the broader evocations of God as the giver of light in the darkness. My remarks reached a national audience via CNN, but I viewed my primary task as pastoral care of my university community, not evangelization of the nation. I sought language which would be recognizably confessional to those with any familiarity with the tradition, while also nurturing the larger Tech populace.

This reflection on my convocation remarks is about seven times the length of the speech. This fact emphasizes that the speaker at public events such as the convocation seldom has the opportunity for a full exposition of the Christian faith. Due to sheer lack of time much of what we wish to say must be implied and evoked. There are no words which are universally correct. Faithful witness involves considering the context of the address and the needs of a specific group of people at a particular time and place. Having done that one prayerfully chooses a word or an image from the Word, offers it to the community, and trusts that the Spirit can use even the most inept witness. There are many preachers who could have been more eloquent than I on April 17. Like many reluctant messengers I take heart from the assurance that the Word does not return empty—and so may all called to proclaim in times of crisis.