

“God Loves You Anyway”

Mark 1:21-28

Gunfire and Crashing Cars: In Struggling Neighborhoods, ‘We’re Losing Our Grip’

A year of hardship in parts of Cleveland has left many with the sense that the fabric of their communities was fraying.

By Campbell Robertson – Published Jan. 2, 2021 Updated Jan. 9, 2021

CLEVELAND — When evening arrives, Darryl Brazil sits on his porch and watches the world fall apart.

His neighborhood on the east side of Cleveland has held on through years of hard times. It was rough around the edges in parts, but his block was quiet, or at least it used to be. Now, wild things happen day and night.

“You’ll see someone come flying down the street doing 50 and 60 miles an hour,” he said. “On a residential street. It doesn’t make sense.” Couples that had always bickered harmlessly are now ending their arguments with a stabbing. Gun battles break out a couple of blocks away. When Mr. Brazil was at the store the other week, a man pulled out a gun and threatened to kill his dog for barking.

“I’ve heard people say that people get crazy when there is a full moon out,” said Mr. Brazil, 71, who has seen a lot but nothing like what he has seen in the past year. “Seems like the full moon is out every damn day now.”

There are plenty of numbers that quantify the combined impact of the pandemic and the recession that have battered the country: At least 7.8 million people have fallen into poverty, the biggest plunge in six decades;

85 million Americans say they have had trouble paying basic household expenses, including food and rent; there are roughly 10 million fewer jobs now than there were in February.

But the numbers do not capture the feeling of growing desperation in neighborhoods like some on Cleveland's east side — communities that had already been struggling before the pandemic. These days people who have long lived and worked in these neighborhoods talk of a steady unraveling.

Gunfire echoes almost nightly, they say. The Cleveland police reported six homicides in one 24-hour period in November. Everyone talks about the driving — over the past few months in the neighborhood of Slavic Village, just two miles west of Mr. Brazil's home, cars have crashed into a corner grocery store, a home and a beloved local diner. In Cuyahoga County, 19 people recently died of drug overdoses in one week. All as the virus continues its lethal spread.

“Sometimes,” said the Rev. Richard Gibson, whose 101-year-old church stands in Slavic Village, “it feels like we're losing our grip on civilization.” I've gotten to know Pastor Gibson through the GCC ministries Divinity participates in.

Pastor Gibson has buried victims of sickness and gunfire alike in the past few months. Overlooking a neighborhood checkered with deserted houses, his church, Elizabeth Baptist, is one of the few trusted institutions in a place where mistrust of institutions runs deep.

The church gym now houses a Covid-19 testing center, and across the parking lot sits a building where parents drop off schoolchildren for remote learning. A huge food bank sets up in the lot every other Saturday; Narcan is also handed out there. A church-affiliated homeless shelter sits across the lawn. There are also the individual pleas for help.

A man recently came to the church asking for five blankets, the pastor said, his family preferring to stay together in their car than split up in gender-segregated homeless shelters.

People at the church and other local support institutions have been working through exhaustion and even sickness for the past 10 months, and they all say similar things: the scale of need is immense; a lot of requests come from those who have never needed this kind of help before; what was already fragile seems to be cracking.

Five minutes south of the church is Neighborhood Pets, a bright nonprofit storefront that opened up four years ago in Slavic Village. It is busy these days. Becca Britton, the founder, says that many of the people who come in have no family, no social network and no support system. “Their dog or their cat, that’s all they have,” she said. But even these bonds are in jeopardy.

Every day people call in because they can no longer afford dog or cat food, she said. Some call panicked because they are not allowed to keep a pet in a homeless shelter. Other calls are much grimmer. One of her customers, an older man whom she thought of as especially kindhearted, is now in jail, accused of killing a woman in his neighborhood after an argument about his dog.

“In the last few months, we have definitely seen a shift,” Ms. Britton said. “It’s changed. You can really, really tell.”

There seems to be something in the human soul that causes us to think less of ourselves every time we do something wrong. It may be the result of parents who expect too much of us, or of teachers who took for granted what we did right and focused instead on everything we got wrong. And maybe it’s good for us to feel that way.

It may make us more sensitive to what we do wrong and move us to repent and grow. But it may lead to our setting unrealistically high standards for us and for others, especially when the “others” live in places like Slavic Village.

Religion sets high standards for us and urges us to grow morally in our efforts to meet those standards. Religion tells us, “You could have done better; you can do better”. But listen closely to that message. Those are words of encouragement, not condemnation. “You could have done better; you can do better” are words that compliment our ability to grow, not a criticism of our tendency to make mistakes. We misunderstand that message of our Christian faith if we hear it as a message of criticism just as we misunderstand our parents thinking they were disappointed in us when all they were trying to do was prevent us from one day looking back and being disappointed in ourselves for not having done our best.

Our religion, our Christian faith, condemns wrongdoing. It takes us to task for lying and hurting people. But our faith also tries to wash us clean of disappointment in ourselves, with the liberating message that God finds us worthy and loves us.

Whether it is the prostitute everyone except Jesus wants to throw rocks at, or the man we encounter this morning in the synagogue with the unclean spirit, the evil is confronted, we are taken to task, we are cleansed of our dirt, and God loves us anyway.

But my experience and Pastor Gibson’s experience as a pastor is that there are a lot of people in the world walking around feeling they are not good enough, feeling disappointed in who they are and not believing they deserve to be loved. My experience has also taught me that much of the unhappiness people feel burdened by, much of the guilt, much of the sense of having been cheated by life, stems from one of two related causes:

either somewhere along the way, somebody – a parent, a teacher, a coach, a pastor, somebody gave them the message they were not good enough or their skin was the wrong color and they believed it. Or else they came to expect and need more from the people around them – their parents, children, husbands, or wives – than those people could realistically deliver. It is the notion that we were supposed to be perfect, and we could expect others to be perfect because we needed them to be, that leaves us feeling constantly guilty and perpetually disappointed.

I tend to be suspicious of books, newspaper articles, or T.V. shows that tell us, “Change just one thing in your life and happiness will be yours”, whether it is changing our eating habits, our work habits, or the way we relate to our husbands and wives. Life is too complicated for one change to make that much difference. Life is even more complicated in a place like Slavic Village where you can’t afford to buy food and gun shots are daily.

But the more I as a pastor deal with people’s problems and the more I as a husband, father, son, brother, and friend learn to look at my own life honestly, the more convinced I become that a lot of misery can be traced to this one mistaken idea: we need to be perfect for people to love us and we lose that love if we ever fall short of perfection. We always feel bad about ourselves and believe we don’t deserve to be loved when we believe that every time we do something wrong, God and the people closest to us will not love us. Or we feel hopeless and lonely like Darryl sitting on his porch and watching the world fall apart.

I have come to believe in a loving, cleansing, and forgiving God who loves us anyway. And I am embarrassed by the use of Christianity to produce guilt rather than to cure it. I believe the central message of Jesus Christ and this morning’s gospel text is liberation, not judgment. The man with the unclean spirit is cleansed, liberated, and made new.

No wonder Jesus' fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Jesus knew first hand the challenge of being human and that there was no way he could expect perfection from us. So Jesus came to wash us clean of our unclean spirits, to wash us clean of our sense of guilt and unworthiness and to assure us that when we have tried to be good and have not been as good as we wanted to be, we have not forfeited God's love.

Instead we come to the realization that God does not expect us to be perfect, just faithful. Now we can stop expecting perfection from our wives, husbands, and children. We can love them, flaws and all, and invite them to love us in the same way.

God loves us, flaws and all. God loves us anyway. God loves the Darryls who live in neighborhoods of gunfire and crashing cars.

Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

#603 – God, When Human Bonds are Broken