

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2017
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

A five year old girl.

A guest preacher.

A man who had served in the Air Force for 29 years.

A 17 month old child.

A musician who played guitar in the church band.

A couple who recently celebrated their 44th wedding anniversary.

A 16 year old girl.

Last Sunday morning they went to Church... to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

And now, their families are planning their funerals.

A deeply troubled man, with a criminal record, ended their lives. If the gun laws which are already on the books had been followed, he would have never been able to legally purchase the weapon.

A man across the street grabbed his own rifle and ran barefoot toward the mayhem. We don't know how many lives that brave man saved.

Understandably, people have called me this week and asked, "Are the church and school prepared?"

Those are good questions. I can tell you that our school community works closely with Henrico police, carrying out the drills and training that are standard for every school in America.

Our parish staff meets with law enforcement. Our ushers received presentations from local police. At almost every mass, there are law enforcement personnel sitting in our pews, worshipping with loved ones.

One law enforcement officer spoke with me this week. He kept using the phrase, “Situational awareness.” We cannot live our lives controlled by fear. But we can be aware of our surroundings. For instance, this officer told me that whenever he goes to a public place, *including a church*, he makes himself aware of the locations of the exits.

Here at Saint Mary’s, we come in and out using the doors near the font. We should also be aware that there are emergency exits here, on this end. We ask you NOT to use these exits on ordinary days. But it’s good to know where the exits are in case of an emergency.

In the Commons, there are four ways to exit. You could come back in through the church, or down the marble steps, or out the doors near the chapel, or out the front doors.

But “situational awareness” means more than that. It means understanding that every public space is precisely that – a *public space*.

For instance, on Sunday mornings, St. Mary’s Church is as open to the public as Short Pump Town Center. There are many doors, hallways and rooms that are open to *everyone*. Open to the *street*.

Since this is a church, people make assumptions about what they can and cannot do here. But we need to think about those assumptions. For instance, at almost every Mass, I observe very young children walking by themselves out of the church to use the rest rooms.

Parents, I ask you – would you allow your child out of your sight to go to the restroom if you were at Short Pump Mall?

After Mass, while folks are chatting in the Commons, I often come upon very young children playing in the hallways, lingering in the chapel... alone. At those moments, those children are 20 yards from their families, out of sight. Would you allow your child to be out of your sight at Stoney Point Fashion Center?

Churches are as open to the public as any shopping mall.

Situational awareness. Taking reasonable steps to be aware of your surroundings. Making decisions – especially about our beloved children – that are ‘common sense’ in every public space.

After events like last Sunday in Texas, we have an opportunity to raise our awareness, and make wise decisions.

Such events also give us the opportunity to reevaluate our own priorities in life. For instance, earlier this week I was pulled aside by a woman who attends a local Protestant church. She and her husband have had some serious conversations this week about their family's priorities.

She told me that she and her husband have allowed lots of people to have too much influence on how they are living their family life.

She lamented that they have not been able to sit down at the table and eat an actual meal together. They are caught up in this cultural madness which keeps children hyper-busy all the time.

Then she made this remarkable statement: "My husband and I realize that we've stopped being parents, and we've become chauffeurs. Our family life has been hijacked by travel soccer and advanced volleyball. We hardly go to church anymore, because teams keep scheduling stuff on weekends, and we don't raise a fuss."

Our conversation concluded when the woman said, "my father used to say that the most important task of parents is to save our children's souls."

Anything which reminds us of the fragility of life can help to clarify what life is all about. Maybe travel soccer is not as important as handing on faith. Maybe the latest cell phone is not as crucial as a child's soul.

In today's Gospel, we meet ten women who have a task, and they need to be prepared for that task.

Some of the women are wise – they know how important the task is, and they set good priorities, they make wise decisions about how best to carry out that task.

But some of the women do not think ahead, and when they have no oil to light their lamps, they assume that someone else will provide what they need.

Now, we all know that Jesus praises those who share. But in *this* Gospel passage, it seems that no one's light would lamp if the wise women gave oil to the foolish. No one would have light at the wedding.

In the very next chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus praises those who give generously. He says, "When I was hungry, you fed me, when I was thirsty you gave me a drink."

But in today's passage, perhaps Jesus is telling us that, in our Christian journey, there are some

things we can only do for ourselves. There are some decisions that we have to take responsibility for.

Yes, we can pray *for* each other. But there comes a point where you have to *pray yourself*. I can't do your praying for you. You have to make the decision, set aside time, and pray.

Yes, we can encourage and educate each other. But there are certain tasks that we each have to start, and work at. A man who struggled with alcohol addiction for years once told me, "my family could not get sober for me. I had to make that decision and take that first step toward healing."

Yes, we can come to church and celebrate Eucharist. But there comes a point where each of us, as individuals, must decide – I am going to try to think like Jesus, and act like Jesus, and do what's right today.

Yes, we can hear homilies which inspire us to think about our priorities – but there comes a point where individuals must make hard choices, where couples decide how they are going to live, where parents decide that their most important task is to save their child's soul. No one can do that for you. No one can provide that oil or light that lamp. The community can support us, but there are some things that require us to hear the Lord and undertake the task.

On days like last Sunday, it's easy to conclude that the darkness is growing.

That's understandable. Yet the Holy Spirit helps Christians to seek God's deeper desires for us.

And it is in weeks like this that the Risen Lord says to us, "Don't give in to the dark – rather, light your lamp. Don't let evil have the last word – rekindle the flame of your faith and let the truth shine in you. Don't give in to the crazy priorities of a culture unhinged from God. You can decide – today – how your light is going to shine. Make the decisions which only you can make. Set your priorities so Christ is the ground on which you stand and the goal toward which your family is reaching.

The Risen Lord, burst forth from the darkness of the tomb into the light of that first Easter day. And his light is a light that no darkness can extinguish.