
The Cost of Love

Remarks made on Duke Chapel steps on Tuesday 17 April 2007

Yesterday confronted us with two of the most powerful human emotions: terror and love. The ghastly events at Virginia Tech hit us in the pit of our stomachs, because they go to the heart of our physical, fragile, common humanity.

When you wander around a college campus, as each of us do every day, you don't just see a host of vibrant human beings – you see a myriad of people each of whose every move is the subject and the result of an immeasurable tide of love: from parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, teachers, mentors, coaches, peers, colleagues. If we truly learned to see any single person in their complexity and in the glory of the way they are fearfully and wonderfully made, we would be overcome by awe that such a creature could biologically exist, and physiologically live, and psychologically thrive. And faculty and staff are really no different to students in that way. They too are prisms that host a rainbow of the loves and hopes and dreams of others.

And yet alongside such wonder is unspeakable horror. If we choose – and modern technology has given us such choices – if we choose to flick a switch on a gadget and end any number of these beautiful, awesome lives, we can. Those simple gunshots, with no fanfare, only silence in between, confront us with the banality of terror. We can, it seems, blow away such a deftly crafted and deeply cherished life as simply as a child picking a flower. Yesterday, someone did just that. And a massive community is brought to its knees. A community had been going about its early morning business, a business that seemed normal; but we now can see how much unspoken love and wonder and fragile beauty it took for granted. A community that did not just reside in Blacksburg, Virginia, but through a spider's web of parents, extended families, alums, friends and former employees, even sometime sporting rivals, stretches far and wide. And because we are people of imagination, it's a community that stretches right here, right now, because we know, instinctively, that we are not immune, that if it happened there it could happen here, and we are gripped by a fear that turns all our cherishing, all our nurturing, all our normal getting along into an anxious grasping to know that those we love are safe, that they will promise never to be exposed to danger, and always to know how much they mean to us.

A community of love knows the searing horror of sudden, violent, merciless loss. A community of imagination doesn't need too many explicit details, for it can visualize the hideous events quite easily. We've gathered today because we are speechless with horror, through terror, through imagination, through love. What confronts us is the limitless harm one person can do. One person's mindless cold-blooded anger can trample down the wonder, the joy and the love of millions. That is the power we give one another over our lives.

For those of us who are people of faith, we are given a glimpse through these events into a reality we don't often perceive. For a moment we see the world as God sees it – full of wonder, beauty, fragile glory and passionate devotion, and yet at the same time cruelly mutilated by violence, horror and terror. We see it that way today. God sees it that way every day. It breaks our hearts. It breaks God's heart. It is the cost of love.