

Easter 3 – A (Virginia Tech)
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On Monday morning of this past week, as most of us were in the midst of work, chores at home or school, Liviu Librescu heroically sacrificed his life, throwing himself at the gunman Seung-Hui Cho and in this act saved the lives of several of his students at Virginia Tech. An Israeli citizen until he emigrated to the U.S., Professor Librescu was a holocaust survivor who lost his life because of the madness of a young man who snapped and went wild with rapid gunfire. Of all the heart wrenching stories of the victims, this is one of the most compelling. With little time to think, Liviu Librescu instinctively offered up his life so that others might live.

The tragedy at Virginia Tech raises so many questions. We might want to cast blame on our nation's unwillingness to have tighter gun control laws; we might be grieved by the stigma attached to mental health issues; we might have serious questions about privacy laws. We could go on and on about these things and indeed many have, but the spiritual learning is that life is fragile. Life is a gift and sometimes that gift is taken away from us by random acts of violence. We never know. And someday, just like Liviu Librescu, we might be called into acts of heroism.

In today's reading from John, we have the story of the most famous fish barbeque in history. Jesus shows up on the beach where the disciples are fishing. As in several other gospels, Jesus gets involved in this and tells the weary fishermen who have been without success: "Try the other side!" Without hesitation, the disciples follow Jesus' orders. They pull up an abundance of fish and suddenly figure out that the man on the shore is Jesus. As is so typical of the gospels, the disciples then celebrate the miracle of the catch of the day by having a meal on the beach.

At the end of the meal, Jesus grills Peter. Jesus wants to know how much Peter loves him; three times he asks Peter: "Do you love me?" And Peter replies: "Yes, of course!" On the third go-round of this persistent questioning, we are told that Peter feels hurt. "What is it that you do not understand about the word yes? How many times do I have to say this?" But then Jesus comes back with the cost of this discipleship; he wants to make sure that Peter understands that the kind of love of which he is speaking is the deepest most faithful love that exists. He says to Peter: "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and you will go where you do not wish to go." Tradition has it that Peter was eventually crucified for refusing to recant his faith and worship the Roman Emperor Nero, probably in around the year 64 AD during the violent persecution of Christians led by Nero. The story goes that Peter requested that his crucifixion be upside down because he did not deserve to die as Jesus did.

Being called to surrender our lives is not something we think we will ever encounter. Even with the tragedy at Virginia Tech, chances are that we will never find ourselves in similar circumstances. It is, however, a valuable spiritual practice to imagine ourselves in that kind of situation when these things happen. It is helpful to ask ourselves "What would I have done had I been in the place of Liviu Librescu?"

Heroism is not something we hear much about except when these kinds of tragedies happen. Heroism generally involves an ultimate kind of sacrifice. But there are so many ways in which we can offer small sacrifices throughout the every day moments of our lives that will help our

community to be stronger. Our faith can help us break down the kind of isolation which is so prevalent in our society. By the time Seung Hui Cho snapped, he had clearly turned into a monster but it didn't happen overnight and that is what makes this whole situation so incredibly sad. In our extreme efforts to both protect the privacy and rights of individuals, horrible things happen: within the privacy of their homes, people suffer from abuse. Because of our reluctance to say anything and get involved in other's lives, mental illness is left unreported, undetected and untreated. As we all know, mental illness that is left untreated leads to isolation and alienation from the larger community. Ultimately as we saw on Monday, a sense of humanity can be lost in mental illness. As I watched the interviews with Seung Hui Cho's suite mates, I could not help but wonder why these young men did not keep reporting Cho's bizarre behavior until something was done.

I must confess that I was more than a bit surprised when I heard that the gunman was Korean because my experience has been that Asian immigrant communities tend to be very close knit. At times I envy these ethnic communities because they historically, especially if they are recent immigrants, tend to take very good care of each other. Not unlike the earliest Christians, they watch out for each other in every way imaginable.

If there is anything hopeful to come out of the Virginia Tech tragedy, it is that we simply need to be more compassionately involved in each others lives. The Christians we hear about in today's gospel and whom we hear more of in the Acts of the Apostles were a close knit group. They met not only on Sundays but in weekly house groups. They were deeply connected to each other.

Here at St. John's, the staff and I are ever seeking ways to strengthen this community by offering opportunities for you to know each other better. We know that if you are not connected to some sort of small group, that something could happen to you and we might never know about it. It is wonderful that so many of you are finding ways to connect either through a Bible study, a music group or even by coming to stuff the bulletins. All of these are ways to be community. What happens on Sunday morning is corporate worship and while there is a certain sense of community, you know that deep community only comes through the sharing that happens in smaller groups.

Jesus is insistent when he asks Peter if he loves him. Jesus knows that at times love is challenging and demanding. That kind of love is being called forth from us now as we work through the grief of the shootings at Virginia Tech. Jesus commands us to feed his sheep, especially the ones that have been scattered through this violence. All of us long for peace in our lives and in the lives of those who are near and those who are far away. This kind of shattering heartbreak calls us to become ever more aware of our shared vulnerability. It calls us to tear down walls in a culture that is known for its ability to build invisible walls. When we are faithful to the Spirit, this kind of tragedy softens us and brings forth compassion from us. Fear and anger are perfectly understandable responses. But eventually, we have to release the fear and allow God to shape and form us into gracious people of wisdom and reconciliation. Each of us can do small things to make our world more compassionate and loving. Each of us can answer Jesus' command to feed his sheep by providing the food of a listening heart. Each of us can join with Peter and grow in our love of Jesus.