

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 16, 2011, Epiphany 2, dedicated Christina Taylor Green (9/11/01-1/8/11) and all children who die from gun violence, to Mary Jane Roberts, mother of Missy Zimmerman, whose light entered eternity on Epiphany, to my friend, Mathew Levy, who died yesterday on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 82nd birthday, and always to the glory of God!

“Compassion: Where Justice and Mercy Embrace”

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

***(Part II of VIII in sermon series
“Windows into our Souls”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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She had just been elected to the student council at her school and wanted to meet her congresswoman and learn more about politics. So last Saturday morning, 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green went to the Safeway Supermarket in Casa Adobes, a suburb of Tucson, Arizona with a neighbor to meet Representative Gabrielle Giffords at an event called “Congress on Your Corner.” At 10:10 a.m., Christina and 18 other people were gunned down by Jared Lee Loughner as he emptied his semi-automatic pistol on the congresswoman and the crowd. Christina and five others - Judge John Roll, Dot Morris, Phyllis Schneck, Gabe Zimmerman and Dorwan

Stoddard - died. All but Christina died at the scene. Congresswoman Giffords is slowly improving as she continues to fight for life following a pass through gunshot to the head. Our heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving are with Gabbie Giffords, the other 12 survivors and those who helped save so many other lives.

Christina Taylor Green was a third grader and an “A” student at Mesa Verde Elementary School in Tucson. She was a dancer, a gymnast and a swimmer. But her sports passion was baseball. As the only girl on her Little League baseball team, she was fond of saying she wanted to be the first woman to play in the major leagues. With a father, John, a major league scout, and a grandfather, Dallas, a player who went on to manage the Philadelphia Phillies, she stood a great chance of breaking this gender barrier.

She also showed an appreciation for life uncommon for a girl her age, and would remind her mother, “We are so blessed. We have the best life.” She liked paying forward with her blessed life by participating in a charity that helped children who were less fortunate.

Born September 11, 2001, Christina was featured in the book *Faces of Hope*, which chronicled one baby from each state born on the day terrorists killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. On either side of her photo in that book were simple wishes for a child’s life. “*I hope you help those in need,*” read one. “*I hope you know all of the words to the National Anthem and sing it with your hand over your heart,*” and, “*I hope you jump in rain puddles.*”

Christina’s life was celebrated in a private ceremony held Thursday at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church in Tucson near the foot of the Santa Catalina Mountains. The church was decorated with pink flowers and large photographs of a grinning Christina. Mourners spoke at an altar topped with a colorful “*ojo de Dios,*” or “God's eye,” a tradition of Southwest Christianity that dates to Spanish settlers and

Native Americans. It is said that some believe the colorful “*ojo de Dios*” open a window into the soul of God.

In the aftermath of the Tucson tragedy, our nation is trying to make sense of yet another senseless rampage and the utter terror wrought by gun violence. With ammunition bought over the counter at Wal-Mart, Jared Lee Loughner, was able to arm himself and wipe out **unarmed** and (all but one) **unknown** shoppers and common citizens in a matter of seconds.

Back in the political campaign season, the violence was just words. There were clever phrases from media-savvy public speakers who said things like "don't retreat - reload!" There were graphic images of public figures promoting campaigns taking aim along with images of gun sight cross-hairs marking other public figures, one of whom was Gabrielle Giffords.

But now it's not just words. **Words**, as the good sheriff of Pima County Arizona told us, **matter**. "Vitriol has consequences," Sheriff Dupnik said.

Vitriol has consequence, and so does its opposite. The opposite of vitriol is love.

So, for the sake of Christina, for other little girls and boys who might yet be interested enough in politics to wish to become public servants like Gabby Giffords or slain Judge John Roll, it's time to meet the vitriol with love. It's time for us to get busy and start practicing love. And I don't mean sweet sentimental love. I mean the hard work of love.

As your pastor and as a preacher, I could talk about the hard work of love by quoting a Bible verse about loving others as you love yourself. I could quote another preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, *"Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out hate: only love can*

do that." I believe that.

What we need in the public square right now, in our places of worship and places of learning, in our TV and radio talk shows, in our Tweets, blogs and Facebook posts and in our supermarket parking lots, is LOVE - a kind of love that looks something like a father's love and a mother's love. It takes exceptional strength to love in this way. *(The past five paragraphs are drawn from Anne Howard, 1/9/11, The Huffington Post)*

This week, my friend and colleague, the Rev. Anne Howard, executive director of the Beatitudes Society, spoke of her love as a mother. She said:

*The kind of love I'm talking about is tender, and it's fierce:
It means paying attention, knowing what time it is and what the weather's like out there.*

It means naming danger when it threatens, and meeting it with savvy and with courage.

It means teaching the difference between right and wrong.

It means being responsible for our words and our actions, and calling on others--like those public figures with their crosshairs--to take responsibility for their actions.

It means showing up, being present, caring, not expecting somebody else to handle it.

It means compassion, knowing that we are all in this together.

And of course it means getting your heart broken, which opens you to hold the pain as well as the beauty of being fully human. So with our hearts broken open right now, I hope we can meet the challenge of these violent times with the power of love, fierce, tender love. We owe it to Christina (Huffington Post, 1/9/11).

Do we have the strength to love this way? Do we have tough minds and tender hearts? Can we love our enemies as well as our friends? Can we pay attention to threats as we teach our children to pay forward with savvy and courage?

Can we teach the difference between right and wrong and be responsible for our words and our actions? Can we show up each day and be compassionate and loving once we arrive? And can we judge not, that we be not judged while living in this world where judgmental and edgy words and actions are the fashion of the day?

It will take exceptional intelligence, faith, courage and strength to live this way of love. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., it will take personal character, which lives into the antitheses of life. Quoting a French philosopher in his sermon *A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart*, Dr. King said, “*No man is strong unless he bears within his character antitheses clearly marked.*”

He continued:

The strong man (and woman) holds in a living blend strongly marked opposites. Not ordinarily do (people) achieve this balance of opposites. The idealistic are not usually realistic and the realists are not usually idealistic. . . . Seldom are the humble self-assertive or the self-assertive humble. But, life at it's best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony. The philosopher Hegel said that truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in the emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.

Speaking of our Savior, he continued:

Jesus recognized the need for blending opposites. He knew that his disciples would face a difficult and hostile world, where they would confront the . . . intransigence of the protectors of the old order. He knew they would meet cold and arrogant (people) whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism. So he said to them, ‘Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.’ And then he gave them a formula for action, “Be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16) (Strength to Love, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1963, p.9)

Dr. King went on to proclaim the cost and joy of discipleship in the emergent synthesis of truth speaking love to power as the means of turning the tide of violent language and violent actions in peace with justice. These words were preached fifty years ago. But the same emergent synthesis is needed today.

Another companion is needed for love on this journey to justice. Love needs compassion as anchor to reality. Compassion derives from both the ancient languages of Latin *patiri* and the Greek *pathein* - which together mean to “suffer, undergo, or experience.” **Compassion** means “to undergo or suffer an experience **with another** person. It means to “be in their shoes,” to “feel their pain,” to “enter with generosity of heart” into another person’s point-of-view.

In her newest book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Karen Armstrong calls for all men and women everywhere to take five steps to live compassionately and thus, help alleviate the suffering of people everywhere:

1. *Restore compassion to the center of morality and religion;*
2. *Return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture which breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate;*
3. *Ensure our youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions, and cultures;*
4. *Encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity;*
5. *Cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings - even those regarded as enemies. (Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, Karen Armstrong, Alfred Knoepf, New York, N.Y., p. 7)*

May we covenant one with another to restore compassion and the hard work of love to center of our lives in these times filled with vitriol and angst. May justice and mercy not merely stand shoulder to shoulder (as they do in the Gladden window

to our west), but in the model of our master teacher and savior, Jesus Christ, may justice and mercy embrace.

May "*ojo de Dios*" - "the Eyes of God" - open the windows to our souls and in memory of Christina Taylor Green, may we hold our hands over our hearts when we sing the National Anthem, dance in rain puddles, help those in need and be known as followers of Jesus Christ who are living lives which restore sanity in these times. It will take living into this thesis of love and compassion which facing the antitheses of life. With God's help and with tough minds and tender-hearts, as mothers and fathers, women and men, youth and children, we can bind together justice and charity.

We must begin now while the windows into our souls are open. Amen.

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