

“Our Children, Our Teachers, Our Family, Our Neighbors, Our Country”

Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21; John 17:20-26

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Senior Minister

May 29, 2022

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 7, May 29, 2022, dedicated to the 19 students, and two teachers slaughtered at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, to Irma Garcia’s husband Joe who died of a massive heart attack following the death of his wife, to the person murdered in Geneva Presbyterian Church in Monterey, CA and to the ten African Americans slaughtered in Buffalo, NY, to their surviving families and to their classmates, co-teachers, parishioners and family in all three places and also to Lola Davis Edwards and Rupert “Twink” Starr, Veterans of WWII and members of First Church this Memorial Day 2022, and always to the glory of God!

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

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Late at night, when everything is calm, Ana Rodriguez looks at smiling pictures of her daughter, **Maite Yuleana Rodriguez**, 10. It’s the only time she has been able to grieve in the chaos of the massacre’s aftermath. Ana says, “I cry and think of her.” Maite was

the only girl in her family, and was happy all her life, her mother said. “If there was a picture of loving, it would be a picture of her.” Maite was focused, ambitious and determined, her mother said. Since kindergarten, Maite had dreamed of becoming a marine biologist. One day she surprised Ms. Rodriguez by announcing that she wanted to go to Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, after overhearing someone talking about the marine biology program there. Ms. Rodriguez said she had hoped to take Maite to Corpus Christi and show her the school. “We never got the opportunity to go,” she said.

“I want the world to know she was my absolute best friend,” Ms. Rodriguez said. “We did everything together. She was charismatic, loving, ambitious, competitive, she was self-driven, focused, she was a fighter and my best friend. She was my sweet girl.”

Maite was one of the 21 people – 19 students and two teachers – who were killed by an 18-year-old gunman on Tuesday, May 24 at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. The other students were nine-year-olds Jackie Cazares and Eliahna “Ellie” Garcia; ten-year-olds Nevaeh Alyssa Bravo, Makenna Lee Elrod, Jose Flores, Uziyah Garcia, Amerie Jo Garza, Xavier Lopez, Jayce Carmelo Luevanos, Tess Marie Mata, Alithia Haven Ramirez, Annabelle Rodriguez, Alexandria Aniyah “Lexi” Rubio, Layla Salazar, Jailah Silguero, Eliahana Torres and Rojelio Torres, and Maranda Gail Mathis, 11. Their teachers were Irma Garcia, and Eva Mireles.

Tess Mata was “very joyful,” said her sister Faith Mata. Ms. Mata remembered her little sister – 11 years younger – three days ago as she stood at the front door of their home in Uvalde, sometimes using the present tense to describe her sister, who died after a gunman stormed her fourth-grade class at Robb Elementary. “She was sassy,”

Ms. Mata said. “She loves dancing. She loves getting dressed up with her hair done. She’s just a ball of joy. I don’t think she ever came in contact with someone and they didn’t leave with a smile on their face.” Tess, who had a cat named Oliver, planned to be a veterinarian, but Ms. Mata thought her younger sister was perhaps more suited to become a teacher. Tess was “an excellent student” and “loved going to school and being with her friends. She loved her two teachers.” The sisters often watched old Disney movies but much of their time together was spent on the softball field where Tess became a second-base standout under the tutelage of her older sister. “That little girl taught herself to pitch by watching YouTube videos and would have been an amazing pitcher,” Ms. Mata said.

Alithia Ramirez wanted to be an artist and have her work displayed in a gallery. At a vigil for the victims on Wednesday Alithia’s heartbroken mother, Jessica Hernandez, showed her daughter’s artwork and cards she had made for her birthday last year. Her mom said, “She was so bright, smart and very talented. She wanted to be an artist. She was always drawing, ever since she was four years old, she wanted to show her art and show how talented she was.”

Jessica read out the card that Alithia had made and given to her for her birthday last year. “Dear mom, you have always been there for me no matter what, you made me feel loved and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate all you have done for me. You are truly a wonderful mother. You are special. Have a wonderful birthday.” Through her tears, her mom said, “I do not want this to happen again. I do not want this to happen to other families. I just don’t.”

When **Maranda Gail Mathis**, 11, started school, she was shy and quiet, her mother, Deanna Gornto, said. But as the year went on, she

opened up and made friends. She was a creative girl who loved music, mermaids and unicorns. She was encouraged by her mother and aunts. She and her younger brother were always together and loved to play Roblox on her tablet. But Maranda also loved the outdoors. She enjoyed running during school field days, swimming in the river and showing rocks she found to her mother. The one thing I know is she loved her whole family,” Ms. Gornto said. “She loved all of us.”

Nevaeh Alyssa Bravo was a princess in the eyes of her family – as her cousins wrote on Facebook. They added, “She is flying with the angels above. We love you Nevaeh!” Then they finished, “Please everyone continue to keep her parents and our family in your prayers.”

Makenna Lee Elrod was beautiful, funny, smart and amazing. She had the biggest heart and loved her family and friends so much. Her smile would light up the room. “Words cannot express the pain my sister and our family are going through,” Makenna’s aunt Allison McCullough wrote, “I know in the coming weeks my sister is going to be overcome with so much and any support is appreciated. Please pray for our family and remember Makenna. We will carry Makenna in our hearts and we know she is with our Lord and Savior.”

Alexandria Aniyah Rubio, known as Lexi, was an honor student at Robb Elementary School who loved TikTok, dreamed of being a lawyer and was “the student every teacher wants,” said her mother, Kimberly Rubio. On Tuesday morning, Lexi, a fourth grader, had just received a good citizenship award and an honor roll award for getting all A’s. Later that day, all of her family’s joy was ripped away. “We talked about women’s rights, and she was a budding feminist,” said Ms. Rubio, 33, her voice breaking at times. Lexi’s parents said they

had waited until the last moment to name her, deciding on something that would stand out when called at her high school graduation.

“She was my baby,” Ms. Rubio said. “I don’t want anybody else to go through this.”

Jailah Silguero, 10, was the youngest of four children, the “baby” of her family, her father said. She loved going to school and seeing her friends. Jailah had told her father, Jacob Silguero, 35, on Monday night that she wanted to stay home on Tuesday. It was uncharacteristic of her, and by morning, Mr. Silguero said, she seemed to have forgotten about it. She got up. She got dressed and went to school as usual. “I can’t believe this happened to my daughter, my baby,” he said. He added, “It’s always been a fear of mine to lose a kid.”

Mr. Silguero and the family were getting ready to go to a funeral home on Wednesday after having spent hours at the SSGT Willie de Leon Civic Center the day before waiting for information about Jailah. Officials asked the family to give a DNA sample using a swab. “I figured after the DNA swab test, it was something bad,” he said. “About an hour later, they called to confirm that she had passed.”

Jailah’s siblings are taking it hard, Mr. Silguero said “They just want their sister back.”

Jayce Carmelo Luevanos was Jailah’s cousin. Jayce died in the same classroom as his cousin. Jayce’s aunt wrote on Facebook “Still can’t believe that we’re never gonna see you again.”

Jackie Cazares and **Annabelle Rodriguez** were also cousins in the same classroom at Robb Elementary School. **Jackie**, who had her First Communion two weeks ago, was the social one, said Polly

Flores, who was Jackie's aunt and Annabelle's great-aunt. "She was outgoing; she always had to be the center of attention," Ms. Flores said. "She was my little diva."

Annabelle was an honor roll student. She was quieter. But she and her cousin were close, so close that Annabelle's twin sister, who was home-schooled, "was always jealous," Ms. Flores said. "We are a very tight family," she said. "It's just devastating."

Amerie Jo Garza was a friendly 10-year-old who still loved Play-Doh. Amerie Jo was "full of life, a jokester, always smiling," her father, Alfred Garza III, said in a brief phone interview. She did not talk a lot about school but liked spending time with her friends at lunch, in the playground and during recess. "She was very social," he said. "She talked to everybody." Amerie Jo's extended family had gathered in the room when the Texas Rangers broke the horrible news late Tuesday. The family's loss came after losing several loved ones to Covid-19 over the past two years. "We were finally getting a break, nobody was passing away," Mr. Garza said. "Then this happened."

Mr. Garza went over to school and there was total chaos. At first, he said, he did not think that anyone had been hurt. Then he heard that children had died. For hours, he awaited word about his daughter. "I was kind of in shock," he said, after hearing from the Texas Rangers. When he got home, he started to go through her pictures. "That's when I kind of had the release," he said. "I started crying and started mourning."

Jose Flores, 10, had a pink T-shirt that said: "Tough guys wear pink." His grandfather George Rodriguez called him "my little Josesito" and kept a photograph of the boy in his wallet. Mr. Rodriguez, who also

lost a niece in Tuesday's shooting, attended counseling at the civic center in Uvalde but said it had offered him little reprieve from the pain. "They were beautiful, innocent children," he said.

Xavier Lopez, 10, made the honor roll on the day he was killed. He was eager to come home and share the news with his three brothers, but his grandparents said Xavier decided to stay at school to watch a movie and eat popcorn with his classmates. They remembered Xavier as an exuberant baseball and soccer player who had a girlfriend at school with whom he chatted away on the phone. Leonard Sandoval, 54, Xavier's grandfather, stood outside the family's home on Wednesday trying to make sense of the incomprehensible. "Why?" he asked. "Why him? Why the kids?"

Manny Renfro said his 10-year-old grandson, Uziyah Garcia, was a "special, special boy" who loved video games, football and brought joy to their entire family. "I stand in grief," he said in a brief phone interview. "I don't sleep. I don't eat." When their family was notified by the authorities on Tuesday that Uziyah was among the victims, his mother "cried and cried," and the family was "hysterical," Mr. Renfro said. "I wept," he said. "Manny was just a typical kid."

Eliahna "Ellie" Garcia was just a few days shy of turning 10, her father, Steven Garcia, said in a brief phone interview. He had been looking forward to being the D.J. at Ellie's birthday party this summer, he said in a Facebook post, adding that she had been "a doll and was the happiest ever." Two days after his daughter was killed, Mr. Garcia said he was "too deep in grief" to share his memories of her but wanted to thank people for their prayers. "We miss her," he said. In his Facebook post, he wrote to Ellie: "Please try and stay by our side, amor."

Euodulia Orta, 30, confirmed that her nephew **Rojelio Torres**, 10, died in the shooting. “We’re still trying to cope with it,” she said. “We don’t know what to do.” Her nephew was the second-oldest of four children, and he always helped out his siblings, she said. “He was a loving person,” she added. “He loved his siblings.”

Eliahana Torres, 10, was determined to get a hit in softball. She was proud to be on the team for the first time, but wanted to stop striking out. So, her grandfather hung a ball outside the family home, and Eliahana would work on her swing after practice, over and over. “One more,” she would say, as her family told her to come in for bed. “One more.” Her family said she was a steadfast, incandescent presence in the home she shared with her grandparents, mother and aunt. She loved to scare her aunt, Laura Cabrales, by springing out from behind a door and shouting “Boo!” She danced around in front of her phone and belted out Taylor Swift’s “You Belong with Me.” “She was my love,” her grandfather, Victor M. Cabrales, said. “She was one of a kind.”

After Mr. Cabrales had heart surgery a few years ago, Eliahana accompanied him on his doctor-prescribed walks, helping him to scoop up pecans that fell from the trees shading their neighborhood near Robb Elementary School. She made sure her grandparents took their medications. On hot days, she poured a glass of ice water to be waiting for her grandfather when he came home from work. The family jokingly called her “enfermerita,” – our little nurse.

Eliahana loved her cat and goldfish and cherished a trip to the lone Starbucks in Uvalde. As summer approached, her aunt, Ms. Cabrales, said that Eliahana told them she would probably cry on the last day of school because she would miss her friends so much.

Layla Salazar was an energetic girl who had just won three first-place ribbons for athletics at school and was already planning summer sleepovers with her friends at her grandparents' house, her grandfather Vincent Salazar said. "My granddaughter was one that loved everything about life, and they took it away from her," Mr. Salazar said in an interview in front of his home in Uvalde on Thursday. "They took her away from us. How do you mend a broken heart from a family as close as we are? Relatives from across the country have come to Uvalde to be with the family as they grieve, Mr. Salazar said, filling the home after the loss of a little girl whose absence could not be felt more strongly. "Layla, to our family, was the heart of our life."

When asked his name by a reporter, Mr. Salazar paused. "I was Grandpa – I was Layla Salazar's grandpa. That was what she called me – Grandpa."

Eva Mireles, 44, loved teaching the children at Robb Elementary School, most recently fourth grade. Neighbors described her as a good-natured person who was usually smiling. "She brought the neighborhood together," said Javier Garcia, 18, who lived next door. "She loved those children."

A cousin by marriage, Joe Costilla, 40, who lives down the block, said that outside of work Ms. Mireles liked to run marathons and was very athletic. "We were always hanging together at barbecues and family gatherings. She was a wonderful person," he said, holding back tears. They had planned to get together over Memorial Day weekend. Mr. Costilla's mother, Esperanza, rushed to his home to console her grandchildren, ages 14 and 10, who knew her well. "They are taking it really hard," she said. "She was the kind of teacher everybody loved."

Audrey Garcia, 48, the mother of a daughter with Down syndrome named Gabby, recalled Ms. Mireles as a transformational teacher in her child's life. Gabby is 23 now, with a high school diploma under her belt. Ms. Mireles had been her third-grade teacher. It was only a couple of years earlier, Ms. Garcia said, that schools in the Uvalde area had begun integrating children with mental disabilities into regular classrooms.

“It was new for teachers in that area,” Ms. Garcia said. Ms. Mireles, she said, threw herself into the work. “She used every teaching method she knew to help Gabby reach her highest potential,” she said. “She never saw that potential as lower than anyone else's in her classroom.”

Irma Garcia, 48, was a teacher of more than two decades. She was known as a steadfast optimist in her family. She would crack jokes at gatherings in Uvalde, sing her favorite classic rock tunes during parties and help her nephew, John Martinez, with his homework.

“She's always been optimistic about everything, and just so loving with the people in her life,” said Mr. Martinez, 21, a student at Texas State University.

On Tuesday, he and his family had gathered to process the news from the authorities: Ms. Garcia had been killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde.

When the authorities went inside the classroom moments after the shooting, Mr. Martinez said, they had “found her body there, embracing children in her arms pretty much until her last breath.”

She had treated her students as if they were her own children, he said, so it had been easy for loved ones to possibly “picture her putting her life on the line.”

Ms. Garcia – or Tia Garcia, as Mr. Martinez referred to his aunt in Spanish – was “like a second mom” to her nephews and students, he said. “She brings a joy and a light to the room.”

Irma’s husband of 24 years, **Joe Garcia**, died two days after the shooting. He had gone to her memorial on Thursday morning to drop off flowers. Ruptured by the grief of losing the love of his life, his heart broke in two and he died of a massive heart attack at the kitchen table that morning when he returned. Irma and Joe leave four children behind ranging from 22 to 13 years old.

Maite, Jackie, Ellie, Nevaeh, Makenna, Jose, Uziyah, Amerie Jo, Xavier, Jayce, Tess, Alithia, Annabelle, Lexi, Layla, Jailah, Eliahana, Rojelio, and Maranda were our children. Eva and Irma were our teachers. Joe was our neighbor. These families are our families. These neighbors are our neighbors. This country is our country. How will we remember them? How will we grieve – this time? How will we respond – this time? How will we be different in the aftermath of this massacre? How will we change because they were here?

In a poem written 48 hours after the massacre at Robb Elementary, our young poet laureate, Amanda Gorman wrote “Hymn for the Hurting.”

Hymn for the Hurting

May 27, 2022

By Amanda Gorman

Everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed and strange,
Minds made muddied and mute.
We carry tragedy, terrifying and true.
And yet none of it is new;
We knew it as home,
As horror,
As heritage.
Even our children
Cannot be children,
Cannot be.

Everything hurts.
It's a hard time to be alive,
And even harder to stay that way.
We're burdened to live out these days,
While at the same time, blessed to outlive them.

This alarm is how we know
We must be altered –
That we must differ or die,
That we must triumph or try.
Thus while hate cannot be terminated,
It can be transformed
Into a love that lets us live.

May we not just grieve, but give:
May we not just ache, but act;
May our signed right to bear arms
Never blind our sight from shared harm;
May we choose our children over chaos.
May another innocent never be lost.

Maybe everything hurts,
Our hearts shadowed & strange.
But only when everything hurts
May everything change.

Amanda Gorman is a poet and the author of “The Hill We Climb,”
“Call Us What We Carry” and “Change Sings.”

New York Times Reporting was contributed by David Montgomery
Richard Fausset, Jack Healy, Eduardo Medina, Christina Morales,
Josh Peck, Campbell Robertson, Edgar Sandoval, Alex Traub and
John Yoon. Also, I drew from the Irish Times article on the victims
of the massacre.