

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me.
St. Michael's UCC
Baltimore, Ohio
September 21, 2025

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Luke 16:1-13

Sometimes a preacher just does not quite know what to say from the pulpit. This is one of those times.

I would love to spend my time today sharing stories about the good times my wife and I had visiting friends in Maine over the last couple of weeks. Or I could tell you about my attempt to eat as many oysters, mussels, lobsters, and fresh-caught Gulf of Maine fish as I could. Yum!

Unfortunately, there has been a very large cloud hanging over our good times that makes it difficult to celebrate. During the past couple of months, the people of the United States have suffered through an onslaught of violence that is impossible to ignore. And that explains why I stole a line from Jeremiah for the title of this sermon. He grieved the sinfulness of ancient Judah and the coming destruction by invading Babylonian armies. I have been almost immobilized by sadness and grief over recent violent developments in no particular order ...

On September 18, 2025, five police officers were ambushed and shot, three fatally, while serving a warrant in York County, Pennsylvania. The suspect in the attack was also killed.

On September 11, 2025, a student opened fire at Evergreen High School in Evergreen, Colorado, wounding two classmates. The shooter later died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

A midshipman was shot and killed by a security officer during a lockdown at the U.S. Naval Academy in Maryland, which was triggered by a false report of a shooting on September 12, 2025.

A mass shooting at a Catholic church at the Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis on August 28, 2025, killed two children, aged 8 and 10, and wounded 17 others. The gunman fired shots through the windows of the church. The gunman committed suicide.

Over the Labor Day weekend in Chicago, at least 58 people were shot, and eight of those shootings were fatal.

In mid-August a woman in Charlotte, NC was knifed to death on a train with other passengers around her seemingly unaware or indifferent or paralyzed by fear.

And of course ... conservative activist Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while speaking at an outdoor event at Utah Valley University on September 11, 2025. The suspect has been arrested and charged and faces the death penalty if convicted.

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All of these events require that we prayerfully support the victims and their families. All of these events require that we pay attention and devote our best efforts to making sure that in the future they happen less often or not at all. All of these events require that we reach out to our neighbors and fellow citizens to form a loving community unified against such violence and the hatred that prompted it.

In one of his most famous sermons, *Loving Your Enemies*, Dr. King preached: “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

I attempted while on vacation to contribute light and love. One of my Facebook friends, a wealthy man, and a pillar of his church, had posted in response to the shooting of Charlie Kirk this comment on Facebook ... Forgive me, but why is the shooting of Charlie Kirk getting so much media play?

The next day my Facebook friend posted “Charlie Kirk was adored by Trump, who called him a legend. He said that everybody loved him. He was also proclaimed to be the "voice of young conservatives." Sorry, people. I've reviewed some of Kirk's obnoxious statements over the years. He was not a "conservative." He was a vile human being, a racist and sexist, a slick opportunist appealing to the worst instincts of all too many Americans. Do I regret his murder. Sure, I regret all murders. Am I sad to see his voice extinguished from the American debate? Absolutely not!”

In between those posts I had responded ... Sad that you would even ask the question ... left or right, there is no justification for political violence ... I lived thru the killings of 1968 ... do not need to go through that again ... and then my main point ... I know nothing about Kirk or what he has said but it only detracts from your stated opposition to [murder] to add [that] he was a terrible person or said obnoxious things. Those are separate thoughts and should not be linked less there are those among us who will take that [judgement of Kirk as a person] as encouragement for hatred and violence.

I am not reproducing the entire exchange here ... suffice it to say that in response to what I thought was a mild reminder of the need for civility I received a middle-finger emoji and comments that asked whether I was just too dumb to appreciate the violence caused by supporting the Second Amendment.

I was stunned by the vituperation in this email exchange. And since that Facebook exchange, I have been struck by the extremes in reaction to Kirk’s murder, I have been horrified by the intensity of those reactions and the self-assurance of those voicing strong opinions. Charlie Kirk was transphobic, homophobic, racist ... Charlie Kirk was one of the finest, most loving Christians of his generation. There is no middle ground, only extreme viewpoints. In fact, the extremes are so very different that it seems as if the people shouting at each other draw their information from completely different universes.

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What a mess! And in order to get myself out of the horror of these events, I want to draw some lessons as we go forward. Maybe you will also find those lessons helpful.

First, we should refrain from making judgments about people. That includes ourselves ... and, if we do not have the ability to judge ourselves about whom we think we might have extensive first-hand information, think about how impossible it is for us to judge other people, about whom we know so much less. Leave judgment about our own lives and worthiness to God. And leave judgment about the lives and worthiness of others to God.

Ecclesiastes 12:14 ... For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Romans 14:13 ... Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister.

1 Corinthians 4:5 ... Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

If there must be judgments, and sometimes that is required, let us not judge each other's lives but judge words and behavior. And let us strengthen and support the institutions that must make such judgments. Courts are charged with judging whether a person's behavior violates criminal statutes as will happen with Charlie Kirk's killer. And, although I am pretty much an absolutist when it comes to being free from governmental interference to speak as we wish, there are words that must be judged when it comes to threatening immediate death and destruction to persons and property.

My experience of the last few weeks underscores in my own mind the need for those of us with public responsibility to think clearly and lovingly about what it is that we say. For elected and appointed governmental officials, for teachers, for clergy, for media pundits and podcasters ... all of us need to think carefully about how to preserve and strengthen the cords of civil discourse that bind us together. Be very careful about name-calling ... just because someone disagrees with you, you shouldn't call him or her insane. Be careful about labelling people, calling them Hitler or Nazis or Communists. Better not to do it. These are children of God and the fact that we disagree today on a particular issue or set of issues does not rule out the prospect that tomorrow we might find common ground on matters vital to the nation's well-being. Indeed, history is replete with the stories of how men and women have changed their minds completely, moving from left to right and vice versa. I once was opposed to Open and Affirming efforts in the church but was led by God to change my mind and assist several churches as they became Open and Affirming congregations.

In particular for Christians, it is so very important to keep God at the center of our lives, individually and collectively. There is no political activist or candidate who can replace God.

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There is no intellectual, no matter how bright and interesting, who can replace God. There is no entertainer or polished public speaker who can replace God.

We run a grave risk if we move away from God at the center. God is pure love and is the source of the love that sustains us. There is no human being who can do that. Following another human being as if they were God can only lead to error and sadness.

And while I am giving advice ... advice I need to follow even as I am urging you to follow it ... take time out for a deep breath. Do not spend your time watching or listening to the media, especially social media. It will literally drive us nuts if we stare at the tv or computer or iPad or iPhone for hours on end.

Push away from the couch or desk and go outdoors. Take a walk. Call up a friend and share a cup of coffee and a conversation. Weed the garden. Walk the dog. Lift your eyes from the screen and participate in God's beautiful Creation.

A final thought ... be skeptical of what you are told. If it is a matter of importance, go back to original documents or film or audio recordings to hear the words or see the actions without interpretation by others. Often the "news" we get is distorted intentionally by people with an agenda or unintentionally by people who are just careless in their reporting. For example, I almost always read important Supreme Court decisions rather than rely on media reporting of their content.

Let me close with a prayer offered by my now-retired Maine clergy friend, Sarah Foulger ... Arbiter of Truth, we hunger for unvarnished honesty. We do not want the truth sugar coated, convoluted or swapped out for something more palatable. We yearn for verifiable facts and authenticity of message. We are prone, however, to see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear and receive information, true or not, that fits well with what we already believe. Draw us, therefore, out of the bubbles in which we too comfortably live and give our leaders not only the moral courage to speak the truth, but the deep care required to speak the truth in love. These things we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen!