

## Ash Wednesday Evening 2018

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup>Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51)



We are desperately in need of mercy. We are painfully in need of knowledge of God's unfailing love. We are a nation in need of forgiveness and the cleansing of our sin.

Today, on a day of repentance, Parkland, Florida experienced a shooting. A school shooting. A massacre. A national sin. Our hearts break at the news of the twelfth (12!) school shooting of 2018 and the loss of life the scope of which is still unfolding.

Our condolences go out to all involved, but our condolences are not enough. That said, the emptiness we feel in the face of this tragedy can easily cause us to shut down, to isolate ourselves, and to turn from the news in despair. I understand the emptiness because I feel it, too. And so, I pray, 'have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love,' and I strive to keep faith with a hurting people, a devastated community, and a nation in need of repentance at our lack of resolve to bring an end to the senseless gun violence that continues to scar the lives of so many young people and their families who start each school day with a hug they hope will be returned later that very same day.

The Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ is a member of the Florida Coalition for the Prevention of Gun Violence and today proves that membership is not enough. Activism and advocacy are essential. It's past time for the Church to act. It's past time to stand up to the gun lobbies and to advocate for Jesus' way of peace that just can't imagine how sisters and brothers or a nation can dwell together in unity while doing nothing to train our common spirit in the ways of justice, while doing nothing to mitigate the availability of weapons that enable such rampant violence, while doing nothing to stand in the public square and shout with a prophet's heart that our prayers are not adequate and our faith demands more. We cannot pray "How long, O God, how long!?" and stand by doing nothing in the face of evil.

Pastors, find your people today and console them. People, find your pastors today and ask them to lead with you in a movement to end violence in our communities. Remember especially the people of Parkland, Florida whose anguish cries out and whose pain demands justice. Help build communities where this doesn't happen. Use your own compassion and power to heal this national sin. And, yes, continue to pray.

Be at peace and be in touch, won't you.

John Vertigan  
Conference Minister