

Shaking the Foundations

Southminster, May 29, 2022

It feels to me like the past month or so has been especially hard—for Beaverton, for Oregon, for our country, and for the world. I don't know, maybe a statistical analysis might reveal that the last 30 days hasn't been any worse than a lot of other 30-day periods. But the news has been especially heavy for me lately. I really hate to start this sermon with such a downer, but I really just need to rattle off some of the terrible things that have happened. I promise that I'm going to do my best to bring us to a better place before I sit down. But here's what we've been going through:

Just 4½ weeks ago on April 27, we learned about the tragic car crash at Murray and TV Highway where a car full of Southridge High School students slammed into a sheriff's patrol car. Two kids dead, three kids and a police officer whose lives are forever impacted.

Five days later, on May 2, a draft Supreme Court decision was leaked to the press that goes to extreme lengths to eviscerate Roe v. Wade. This church has always been proudly pro-choice—and loudly pro-choice at times. That said, the abortion issue is not the binary issue that many portray it to be, and I know that people here and everyone else lie at many points on a very long spectrum. But even a less belligerent overturning of Roe v. Wade is opposed by a solid majority of Americans—and has been for decades.

Pregnant people are already having to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to access healthcare—and that will get much worse. And with legislation pending in some state legislatures, women who have an abortion out of state might be taking a legal risk by setting foot back in their home state afterwards. We may be in a position of having to set up our own modern-day underground railroad to protect women as they travel to get the care they need. And the way the opinion is written, the next dominoes to fall may be contraception, marriage equality, even interracial marriage.

A week after the draft opinion leaked, on May 9, we learned of the death of 13-year-old Milana Li, who was murdered in Beaverton's upscale Murray Scholls neighborhood while out on a walk. And while not much is being said about the active investigation or the suspect who has been arrested, it seems that the fact that Milana was a recent immigrant to the U.S. may have been a factor.

Five days after that, May 14, we had the mass shooting at the Tops supermarket in a tight-knit Black neighborhood in Buffalo, New York. Ten people were killed and three injured. The perpetrator posted extensively on social media, and we quickly learned that he targeted Buffalo's East Side because it had the largest concentration of Black people with a few hours' drive of where he lived. And he chose a supermarket because he thought that would be the best location to instill terror in the Black community and cause them to live in fear. The hatred is chilling.

The very next day, May 15, a gunman opened fire during a church luncheon at the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, a congregation that meets at the Geneva Presbyterian Church of Laguna Woods, California—a part of our Presbyterian Church (USA). One person dead, five injured. It could have been much worse if not for several courageous church members who subdued and hogtied the gunman until police could arrive. Although the perpetrator was Asian and spoke with church members in the Taiwanese HAA-kee-uhn language, it seems that he acted out of hatred for Taiwan and the Taiwanese community.

Two days later, May 17, we had primary elections here in Oregon, and once again Clackamas County is having problems. This is the county where an election worker was caught in 2012 filling in Republican candidates on ballots where the voter had left a race blank. It seems clear that part of what is going on over there is incompetence, but there may be a corruption element as well. The consequence is that Oregon, which has among the highest voter turnout and fewest election problems of any state, now has a public perception problem about the integrity of elections.

Three days after that, May 20, I saw a news article that deeply disturbed me. Zander Moricz, the first openly gay senior class president of Pine View School for the Gifted in Osprey, Florida, was preparing his commencement address. But his principal warned that his mic would be cut if he mentioned his LGBTQ+ identity. Florida is where the governor recently signed the “don't say gay” bill that puts LGBTQ+ teachers in permanent risk of legal liability, along with any teacher who mentions the existence of any kind of queer identity or relationship. He said that it made the last week of his senior year the worst week of his life. The bigotry has moved from whispers to out in the open in so many places.

Four days after that, this past Tuesday, May 24, another mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Uvalde is not on any of my well-beaten paths in Texas, but I have driven through there several times over the years, and I have family in nearby San Antonio and Austin. 19 fourth graders and two teachers dead, along with

the shooter. 18 injured, including the shooter's grandmother at home. So devastating in every way. Such an obvious repudiation of the thesis that "the only way to beat a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun."

Three days after that, this past Friday, I got an email that my kids have a lockdown drill this week at school. It was prescheduled and didn't have anything to do with the Uvalde incident, and they've had several of those this year. I'm just beyond words.

Of course, all these events occurred against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, started by a totally unjustified invasion by an authoritarian tyrant against a democratic nation that was just starting to find its way. Because of the surprising bravery and smart strategy by the Ukrainians, the war is not over. Unfortunately, it is settling into a slog that is probably not going to end for many months or years, costing the world billions in weapons supplies and humanitarian assistance—not to mention the future cost of rebuilding the country. And the loss of Ukrainian and Russian grain and other commodities from the world markets is probably going to result in a grave food shortage in parts of Africa and Asia. I pray that this doesn't result in mass starvation this summer.

I am really sorry to spend so much time on such a depressing litany of current events, but that's where my heart has been.

Back a couple months ago when Scott first asked me to preach today, I looked at the lectionary texts for this date and saw the fascinating tale of the earthquake that demonstrated that Paul had the power to escape his captors.

It's typical for the book of Acts, which is the epitome of "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative" in the way the narrative is constructed. It all starts when Paul and Silas are just trying to help someone who is tormented.

But sometimes you get in trouble for helping someone if doing so winds up reducing financial profits for someone who probably would get by just fine without those profits. So they drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace—the equivalent of taking them to court. And notice the gaslighting here: The accusation is not that they have devalued this property of ours. Rather, they say "These Jews are advocating unlawful customs!" Yeah, right. Purity of local customs was totally their motivation. And the mention of the fact that they're Jews is just incidental. Paul and Silas are thrown in jail because their accusers have the power to do it.

And that night, the foundations were shaken. It's an external force. It's the creaking of the arc of the moral universe. As Dr. King famously said, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

The book of Acts is full of miraculous stories like this. If you read the book by itself, you would get the impression that a significant percentage of the Roman world had accepted Christianity by the end. In reality, the immediate impact was much smaller.

Yet here we are today, 2,000 years later, sitting in a Christian church. There was an impact back then, even if it wouldn't have been that visible if we had been reporters on the ground at the time.

Shaking the foundations. It's happening all around us. The NRA's convention in Houston this weekend had more protestors outside than delegates inside.

Shaking the foundations. It's happening all around us. Over the past month, I have seen more testimonials on social media from people who have had abortions in the past than I remember seeing before. This is good, because even though one in four women has had an abortion, a majority of Americans don't know anyone whom they know to have had an abortion. That's how support for marriage equality increased steadily by two percentage points per year for 20 years. Nate Silver analyzed the polls, and determined that half of each increase can be explained by old people dying off and young people replacing them in the electorate. The other half is explained by increases in the percentage of people who say they know someone who is LGBTQ+ personally. So a critical mass of people coming out was key to the shift in public opinion, and this will help with abortion too.

Shaking the foundations. It's happening all around us. When the time came for Zander Moricz to give his commencement address, you know what he did? He used his curly hair as a metaphor for his LGBTQ+ identity. He said, "I used to hate my curls. I spent mornings and nights embarrassed by them, trying to desperately straighten this part of who I am. But the daily damage of trying to fix myself became too much to endure. There are going to be so many kids with curly hair who need a community like Pine View and they will not have one. Instead, they will try to fix themselves so they can exist in Florida's humid climate." He got his message across, and got a standing ovation from his classmates.

Foundations are shaking all over the place. Despite that, things will probably get worse before they get better, and visible progress will be frustratingly slow. The situation for women seeking abortions will be perilous in many parts of our country for the foreseeable future. LGBTQ+ rights may have some setbacks. And even if modest gun safety legislation can be passed at the federal level, the 300 million firearms currently in use in this country—including 10 million assault rifles—still may have decades of useful life.

Last fall, when the Texas abortion ban was passed and upheld by the Supreme Court, I heard a monologue by the podcaster Dan Savage. He talks about an experience that he had right before hearing about that decision. He walked to a cannabis dispensary to get some edibles, had a conversation with the clerk about his relationship with his husband and her relationship with her girlfriend. A perfectly natural conversation in a perfectly normal environment today. But as he noted, the conversation would not have happened a decade earlier. There were no recreational cannabis dispensaries, marriage equality didn't exist, and there was less talking about LGBTQ relationships in public. What's more, the clerk can now earn close a living wage by working retail thanks to Seattle's \$15 minimum wage and requirements that healthcare be provided—not true a decade ago. That totally natural conversation would not have happened in 2012.

He concludes by saying: “I feel right now how I felt in 2004 when anti-gay marriage initiatives passed in 11 states. I am feeling despair. But we fought back, and we won. We can fight back, we can win. We're going to have to fight back, we're going to have to win. And we will. And won't that be a moment.”

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. And the foundations are shaking.