

[PRAYER] [BLANK] I am glad to see you all here today, and glad that we have a chance to consider some tough subjects in today's scriptures from a perspective of faith and Christian hope. We come to church to experience the joy of faith, and the warmth and encouragement of Christian fellowship, which build that hope in us. It's important to remember that, because, if we look outside the walls of this church, there have been some very disturbing headlines in the news that might threaten to shake our faith in God. We come to grow in our ability to respond to this world, filled with violence and evil, with Christian hope in our hearts. We're not here to deny the truth of evil in the world; what we're here for is to reaffirm that Christian faith offers us a response to that truth that is far greater, and far more powerful, than the evils of the world.

To respond to evil with our Christian faith, though, first we have to be honest about this thing we call "evil." Does the evil that Christian faith confronts look like the horrors of a mass execution on the streets of Las Vegas? Is it the insanity of global leaders threatening nuclear war, or failing to respond to an overwhelmingly clear crisis in our stewardship of the world's climate? Is it a lynching in the 21st century, jets flying into the World Trade Center towers, a bible study group being murdered in their church?

Certainly our Christian faith is meant to confront all of these kinds of evils, and far more. But it seems that the real evil that our faith is meant to confront is an evil far greater, far more insidious, far more corrosive, far more a threat to the future of humankind and our planet, than any of these horrible events. I say this, because I believe that the real evil that Christian faith is meant to confront is the worst evil of all - a common evil. Everyday evil. Garden variety evil. Evil that adds up, one day, one person, one situation at a time, until, all of a sudden, we recognize that the real face of evil is not the face of a madman, but the face of our next door neighbor, the kid down the block - or, perhaps, even, ourselves. All evil, I believe, is, ultimately, a common evil, the evil that exists because we choose to worship our passions and honor our God, rather than worshipping our God and honoring our passions. You don't need a madman to do this. Anyone can do it, any day, any time, anywhere.

This is why, in today's reading from Exodus, we see the Ten Commandments, the basic moral law of God, starting with God's crystal clear command to make worshipping God, and not the idols of our passions, our number one priority in faith. God knows that we have our passions; our desires; the urge to do things. They're a part of who God has made us. God knows that having a passion for life can be good, and creative, but God also knows that honoring our passions can turn into us worshipping our passions. This is why God says that we should not have false idols before our God. God wants us to honor our passions for our loved ones, our activities, our culture, but not worship them, and never to mistake honoring God - giving God what's due - for worshipping God - giving God our hearts and devotion. God wants us to worship God as our primary passion, for our own good. When we slip into worshipping our passions, one decision, one "maybe just this time" at a time, our common slips of worshipping our passions push our love of our God and God's ways out of the picture, until common evil becomes...normal.

If we look at the horrible mass shooting in Las Vegas, it isn't hard to see how a

common evil was at work. The numbers are horrible - at least 59 deaths, and 489 injuries from a massive cache of weapons fired by Stephen Paddock, a lone shooter. This is extraordinary, shocking, and repulsive. There are no other words for it. And yet, it is only one of more than 1,500 mass shootings in the United States in the last 1,700 days. The true evil of this hideous crime in Las Vegas is that it's just a larger example of a crime that happens almost every day in America. We are used to evil, it seems. Evil is part of the woodwork; we have come to accept it. We just don't like to be reminded of that fact.

The commonness of evil is also seen in the personalities of the people who commit these crimes, and how they commit them. [PADDOCK SLIDE] When the police first interviewed people about Stephen Paddock, he seemed like an everyday person, unremarkable; just another gun owner. Oh, yes, he liked to gamble, and, yes, he liked to collect some guns, but, hey, after all...who doesn't? It was only later that the police learned that Paddock had been collecting a huge arsenal of weapons for years, one gun at a time, seeming perfectly normal to people immersed in common evil. [EICHMANN]

Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader who ran the death camps where more than six million people were put to death in World War II, was eventually captured and put on trial in Israel in 1962. Hannah Arendt, a reporter who went to Israel to cover the trial, noticed that throughout the trial, the most scary thing about Eichmann's personality and attitude is that he seemed so...normal. He didn't foam at the mouth, or appear like a mastermind. He was a fairly common person, who, one day at a time, decided to do things that were more and more evil. [BLANK] Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray, Jim Jones, Adam Lanza, Osama Bin Laden, and more - these people were very ordinary in so many different ways. A day at a time, they and others didn't really notice or care that they were slightly more evil than the day before. It turns out that extraordinary evil is just...ordinary; ordinary evil that we ignore, one decision, one action, one denial at a time.

Getting used to evil is one of the greatest sins of all. Allowing our hearts to become numb to the evils of the world removes us from the love of God, who is our hope for healing our hearts. Numb hearts cannot live like Christ, to make Christian hope in action the hope of the world for conquering evil. Evil knows this, and so common evil works in the world to lure us in, one TV click at a time, one mouse click at a time, one credit card swipe at a time, one phone screen tap at a time, one resentment at a time, one drink at a time, one think at a time, one making our passions our gods at a time, until we no longer remember the God who we are meant to love and serve above all. Forgetting who God is in our hearts is like the wicked tenants in today's reading from Matthew: In a world where everything good has been given to us by God, we can forget even the basics of honoring our God, much less worshipping God, to the point that we kill off the very power of God that God gives us through faith to save us.

If you think that your personal devotion to worshipping the real and saving God above your passions just isn't that important to fight evil, remember why Adolph Eichmann was able to execute millions of people, without resistance, in a country that claimed to be Christian. [NAZI ALTAR] He was able to do it, without organized resistance from

Christians, because their churches had become houses of worship for the passions of the people, one common evil at a time. [BLANK]

How can we, simple Christians in a complicated world, live our faith in a way that protects us from these evils, and makes us witnesses in Christ against evil, as we vow to do in our baptism commitments? First and foremost, it is our responsibility to come and worship - not just to honor God, but to worship God, to open our hearts to make God the center of who we are, so that we can be who God wants us to be for others. If you think that you're too old for this to matter, remember this: your enduring witness of faith is an enormously important example for younger generations, and to other people in your generation who are exposed to evil as much as anyone else. If you think that you are too young for your worship to matter, remember this: you don't have to have perfect faith to be perfectly willing to let faith grow in you through worship. A future filled with evil, evil that is unchallenged by authentic Christian faith, is not a world that you'll want to live in, much less your children.

And if you're in the middle of your life, and you think that authentic worship is just too risky, too expensive, too much of an inconvenience to make it worth your while, remember that you, above all, have souls that are risk, because the common evils of the world tempt you, every day, to make our own story, the story that you invest in so heavily, more holy than God's story. If worshiping God is your plan "B," evil is happy, because evil knows that worshiping your own passions as your plan "A" makes you ripe targets for the spiritual death we call sin. We will think that we're safe just honoring God at a distance, but when it comes right down to it, we can't phone in our devotion to God, while our passions are right in front of us.

And if you think that you're too broken to reach out for Christian faith and worship as the cornerstone of your everyday life, know that the courage to begin again is a path that Christians have followed since the time of Jesus. I had to follow this path as a person who rejected God's path to ministry forty years ago, struggling through many crises towards God's grace, and humble Christian service.

Most of all, we all need to remember that worshiping God is not just something that happens at 10AM on a Sunday morning. Coming to a worship service is very important, not just for what it is, but because it sets the pattern of how we need to live every moment of our life. Having no gods of passion before the living God, who is so passionately in love with us, is a full-time commitment to having our loving God guide everything that we do. This is why this is the FIRST commandment of the Ten Commandments. If we don't do this one right, the others will never be right in our hearts.

There are many things that we can do to make the world a better, more loving place. But first and foremost, we need to start with what we do in our hearts with God to make our hearts the most loving place possible, in the image of the loving God who never wants to leave our side, every moment of every day. With that passionate and devoted love of God in our hearts, evil doesn't have a chance. One person at a time, bit by bit, we can make this so. Let's start with ourselves. Let's do it now. Then, let's take it to a world that

needs it so very much. Amen.