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For almost 12 years I have been preaching in this very pulpit. Never before have I had such a terrible time figuring out what to say to you as today. Never before have I had such difficulty in finding the appropriate words to preach *grace*. I am glad most of our children are attending second service for the Children's Program, because there are some things brought up in this sermon that might be confusing to them.

Of course, this is all in light of Friday's school shooting in Connecticut. Sadly, this event is not horribly shocking to Americans, because we've seen this before...which makes it even worse. I stopped in at the bank in DeWitt on Friday, where I saw the Breaking News on the TV, of the children running from the school, of police surrounding the building, of crying parents searching for their kids...I finally left, because, frankly, I felt like I was going to throw up.

I drove home, got on the computer and read several reports on the terrible incident. I then opened up a Word document to write this sermon. The screen was blank, and the cursor blinked at me, as if to mock me. I had nothing to say. I had nothing to write. I didn't want to think about God with those images of the kids still fresh in my mind. It was the first time that had ever happened to me. All I felt was sick.

Sandy Hook Elementary School is a school for grades kindergarten through 4<sup>th</sup> grade, kids aged roughly from 5-10 years of age. The gunman was apparently in his 20's, who finally shot himself, bringing the total loss of life to 27. Next to the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, this is the worst school shooting this country has ever seen. All random shootings are nightmarish—the ones at malls or movie theaters and such—but this is a school for little kids. Ages 5-10. Little kids. An act of pure evil. I still feel sick.

This past fall, I held a first communion class for the fifth graders of this parish. They received their First Communion on Reformation Sunday, if you recall. Every class of first communion kids is special to me, but this one was even more special, because these were the first kids I baptized. The honor and privilege I felt the day they first received the sacrament of Holy Communion is indescribable. I felt, in some odd way, like a parent to all of them. God has blessed me to have played a role in both sacraments—baptism and communion—in the lives of these kids. On any given Sunday, when I look out over the congregation and see kids in the fifth grade and below, I rejoice that I have baptized them into God's church, that God has allowed my hand to pour water over their heads. I have the best job in the whole wide world.

Our first communion class is offered to fifth graders. This is the age range of the kids who went through hell on Friday...Little ones, kids under

fifth grade, kids who are the same age as my kids. I cannot even wrap my head around the whole thing...what if that happened here? We think our community is safe, too. What about the parents of those little victims? What about the spouses of the staff that died? What about the family of the gunman?

What if they were all sitting here today, in these pews, waiting to hear a word of grace? What would I say? Could I preach the same sermon to the parents of those dead children, the survivors of the teachers who were shot, the relatives of the man who was responsible for the whole cursed thing?

This is where the rubber hits the road. Is grace *grace* for everybody? Or is God's grace only for some, namely the victims, but not the perpetrators? I fear for the family of the gunman, for the wrath that is about to descend on them. What is Christmas for a parent whose child was just shot in school? What is Christmas for the mother of that gunman?

This is how I know I am not God. Not that I ever really suffer from the illusion of being God, but things like this make me thank God I am not God. Because if I were, no hell would be hot enough for that gunman, and for anyone who hurt kids. If one—or all—of my sons were shot that day, I know I would have a hard time remembering the unconditional grace of God that we Lutherans hold so dear. But I am not God, thank God.

God's grace, and God's justice, are altogether different than our idea of grace and justice. God *had* to enter our world, because human instinct is to take revenge. We cling to “an eye for an eye” instead of “love your enemies.” But we Lutherans confess and believe that grace is grace, that Jesus comes at Christmas time for all people, for the little ones who died, for their grieving families, for the gunman and his grieving family, for that community of Newtown, for our community, and for communities around the world, all wondering the same thing, “Are we next?”

We confess and believe that Jesus was born and died to save all people from hell and death. All people....remember the words from Isaiah we heard last week—*all people shall see the glory of God*? If we meant it last week, we must mean it this week, as well.

These are words I don't feel much like saying today, though, if I am brutally honest with you. I know we confess these things, and I do believe them, but when I think of those little kids at that school, I have a hard time saying the words right now...when I put my kids to bed and think of those parents who don't get to do that anymore, I have a hard time remembering words like grace and mercy...but still we say them, because deep down, we believe those words, even if we don't like those words sometimes.

Some people say it's extra bad that this happened at Christmas time, and on one hand, they are right. On the other hand, the timing just shows us how much we need Jesus to be born...how much we need Jesus to grow up

and die on the cross...how much we need him to fight Satan and win...how much we need him to fill his heaven with a grace we simply cannot fathom, with a forgiveness we cannot understand, with a mercy we ourselves resist.

This is one of those times when we let God be God, and we let us be us. We are angry and scared, and maybe even our faith is rocked to the core. That's ok. We are allowed to be angry and scared and to shake the fist at God and at this world that we ourselves have broken...

In the good times, and in the bad, God will be God...he comes at Christmas to bring about the healing this world desperately needs, to bring about his justice, to usher in his day of redemption. And on the last day he will judge all people, you and me and that gunman and those little kids...and somehow, miraculously, there's a heaven big enough to hold us all. In the end, God's Christmas grace pours down over every single person ever

created, especially over those wretched ones who harm and hurt and kill,

because, I guess they need it most.

Jesus, come quickly, for we need you now more than ever before.