Once again, we gather with heavy hearts after the tragic event at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, last Sunday. It is a horror so unspeakable that we are left to lament with tears and cries of anguish. In recent months each week has held one heartbreaking experience after another as the sanctity of human life has been threatened and betrayed. Many among us are experiencing painful personal crises. At times we feel helpless and powerless before the forces of chaos that seem to swirl around us.

We need to gather in this holy place, to ground our souls in the firm foundation of God’s everlasting faithfulness. I remind you of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. Victory is ours through God who loves us.”

God invites us to partner with God in generating life, giving birth to abundant life for all God’s creation, so that all will know that goodness is stronger than evil. In recent weeks I’ve shared Gary Gunderson’s leading causes of life as forces which help us all thrive in life. When we focus on these leading causes of life, we may help prevent someone from going astray in ways that are harmful to themselves or others.

The first leading cause of life is Coherence, which is a sense of meaning or purpose. I challenged you to write a six-word Mission Statement. Mine is: Love God. Love Neighbor. Midwife Disciples. Having a sense of purpose generates life for us and for others.

A second leading cause of life is Connection. We are designed for relationship with God and for social connections to other human beings who support and challenge us. We need to have someone in our boat and we need to extend a hand to those who need us in their boat.

A third leading cause of life is Hope based in the promise that with God all things are possible. We are propelled forward into a future with vision, creativity, and imagination because God is always at work creating life anew. If you think you’ve reached a dead end, remember that God isn’t finished with you yet.

A fourth leading cause of life is Blessing, which is a good, affirming word. God invites us to choose blessing over curse, not to crush others with negativity, but to bless others with life.
The fifth leading cause of life is Agency or action. Agency “turns abstract nouns into verbs. Agency turns connection into connect, build, reach, touch, embrace, and heal.”

Agency moves us from purpose to decision to conscious action.

“When the Civil Rights movement hung by a slender thread, its young leaders were baffled by storms of violence and political cynicism beyond what they had anticipated in their darkest imaginations. They argued strategy through the night - whether to go back to the violent streets, into the courts, back to the churches, around the schools, or to withdraw until they could figure it out. John Lewis, all of 23 years old, said, ‘I’m marching.’ They argued for another hour until Lewis said again, ‘I’m marching.’ Again they debated, wearing themselves out in analysis. The next morning Lewis got up and marched. So did hundreds of others. It was all they could do at that moment, and so they did. He moved, chose, acted. That expression of agency created hope when there was none to be found. It will be remembered as a blessing long after Lewis lays his body down. It connected people who had been shattered. It created the possibility of coherence where there was little left.”

The letter of James calls us to put our faith into action. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” It is not enough to read the Bible or listen to its interpretation. The important step is putting God’s word into practice in our everyday lives. As John Ruskin said, “What we think, or what we know, or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only consequence is what we do.”

Agency requires initiative. Too often we simply fail to seize the opportunity, to take the initiative, to make a move. A Chinese proverb says, “He who deliberates fully before taking a step will spend his entire life on one leg.” Some people wait too long to bring life. They never take the risk of stepping forward. Many of us are plagued by procrastination in some aspect of our lives. We tend to put off something unpleasant, uninteresting, or complex.

Philosopher William James said, “Nothing is so fatiguing as the hanging on of an uncompleted task.” The longer we let things slide, the harder they become. The only way to get rid of a difficult task is to do it. That takes initiative.

A man who was employed by a duke and duchess in Europe was called in to speak to his employer.

“James,” said the duchess, “how long have you been with us?”

“About thirty years, Your Grace,” he replied.

“As I recall, you were employed to look after the dog.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” James replied.

“James, that dog died twenty-seven years ago.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” said James. “What would you like me to do now?”
Like James, many people wait for someone else to tell them what to do next. They may have good thoughts, ideas, and intentions, but many never translate those into action. Doing so requires initiative. Acting often means the difference between success and failure.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said, “To move the world we must first move ourselves.” If we want to make change, we’ve got to take the first step. The action we take need not be on a grand scale. One teacher and scholar had translated medieval works, written important articles in her field, and made influential contributions to the theory and practice of teaching history. When asked if she planned to write “the big book” that laid out her theory of everything, she replied, “I prefer to do the small, beautiful thing.”

Knowing our purpose helps us carefully select the actions that enable us to fulfill our own unique mission. For a few people, actions are taken on a grander scale, but most of us are called to do “the small, beautiful thing” in our own corners of the world.

What action is God calling you to take, an action that generates life for yourself and others? I have some opportunities!

On the Heart Cards in which we expressed Visons and Hopes for the Congregation, someone suggested a phone tree which would help us keep in touch with our homebound seniors, letting them know that we remember and care about them. We have 20 or 30 homebound seniors who would delight in receiving a monthly phone call and card from their church family. It would not be difficult to set up such a system. We need an organizer, some phone callers, and we’ll provide a list of seniors.

Recent disasters have surfaced the need to develop a Disaster Preparedness Plan so that we are ready to respond promptly should such an event strike here. We need a few folks to form a task force to design a such a plan.

Some among us are committed to providing Christmas Day dinner for up to 120 people at Hope Harbor Shelter. Help is welcome in various ways: cooking, serving, shopping, donating.

At the recent Mayor’s Breakfast, it was noted that approval has been given for over 1,100 new housing units in the city. There is tremendous potential for this congregation to fulfill its vision of “bringing hope by inviting and embracing all on a life-changing Christian journey.” We can act by forming a team to reach out to those new residents and invite them to experience Christ’s love in this place.

We are never absent opportunities to put our faith into action and to serve our neighbor in need.
A tourist paused for a rest in a small mountain town. He sat down on a bench next to an old man in front of the town’s only store. “Hi, friend,” he said, “can you tell me something for which this town is noted?”

“Well,” answered the old man without a moment’s hesitation, “you can start here and get to anywhere in the world you want.”

Indeed, we can go anywhere we want, if we act, but without agency we will never reach our potential. It is like a caterpillar that won’t get into its cocoon. It will never transform, forever relegated to crawling on the ground, even though it had the potential to soar as a beautiful butterfly.

This is a generous congregation with great potential to generate life and faith. May we dare to seize the opportunities that lie before us, acting with passion, energy, and agency, that we might reach our God-given potential.

Gracious God, all day long you are working for good in the world. We give thanks for your tireless agency on our behalf. Your goodness inspires us to act in partnership with you, that all might know your goodness.

We give you thanks for veterans who have acted to serve our nation and to protect our liberty. Send your healing presence upon all who were harmed in warfare, offering comfort amidst pain and courage for each new day. Abide with Gold Star families whose loved ones did not return, granting them your peace. Offer safety, health, and integrity to all who continue to serve including members of our families.

We pray, O God, that you would tenderly care for the people of Sutherland Springs, Texas, as they mourn loved ones and support many injured in body, mind, and spirit. Act powerfully to soothe their wounds and move them toward healing and hope.

We lift to you our loved ones, seeking your peaceful presence with them.

Inspire us, O God, with your grand vision for this congregation and our world. Motivate us to take action to participate with you that goodness might triumph over evil, that love might conquer hate. Move us toward love that is sacrificial and life-giving....

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ii Ibid, pp. 104-105.


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