

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968, in Memphis. As you know, Ray was not the only one who wanted to murder King.

Just the day before, there was a bomb scare on his flight from Atlanta to Memphis. Before that, his house was burned, and in 1958, a woman stabbed him at a Harlem bookstore.

The night before he died, Dr. King delivered his I've been to the Mountaintop, speech. He spoke to a subdued crowd, and waxed melancholic about his brushes with death.

Like anybody, I'd like to live - a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.

And one wonders, whether he spoke metaphorically or literally, the promised land of the cause, or the promised land of heaven.

Whichever, Dr. King was saying, the values we live in life are more important than the life itself. A paraphrase, perhaps, of Patrick Henry, give me liberty, or give me death.

Or the life of Jesus, who died so others could live.

The important things in life are costly.

Earlier in that same speech, Dr. King referred to the men who wanted to kill him as – his words – my white sick brothers – and I find it curious that he chose those words, my white sick brothers, and not sick white brothers – the men are brothers first, sick second; that they are white is a fact, not a racial epithet.

I didn't know it, but Shari told me the other day that a prime tenet of nonviolence is this – we have no enemies, only opponents.

White sick brothers – and I have to say, what a phenomenal person to acknowledge those who want to do you harm as brothers. Opponents, yes, enemies no.

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

When I first heard that Jared Lee Loughner had murdered six people – the first thing I thought about was his parents.

I projected myself into their situation – and realized immediately their lives were ruined. I hurt for them - But then the question came to me – what if Jared murdered because he had bad parents? Had they beaten or abused Jared?

We have since learned that this is likely not the case – Jared’s parents struggled with him, but over his mental illness.

How awful, to watch the light of your child eclipsed by some enormous hatred or angst or just plain evil. (And again, I felt for his parents.)

The reporters and pundits did not think of the parents, first. Instead, they raced to blame the vile rhetoric in our country, these days.

Each side blaming the other for the ills of the nation. As though it’s Sarah Palin’s fault that Jared shot people.

In reality, what happened last week is complex. There is no simple explanation – and it almost certainly involves all three issues:

Mental illness – how our society addresses mental illness, not very well...

Parenting – Could or should Jared’s parents have found him better professional help? Or, why did his schools not do more for him?

Vile rhetoric – clearly Jared fixated on Representative Giffords – was this because of the rhetoric?

This killing has made me reflect on how I’ve tried to raise my children – and how we as a society raise all of our children – and this involves both the rhetoric and the parenting.

When Tate, my son, was about 4-5, Pokemon was all the craze. You remember – those Japanese anime’ –

One day, we were driving around town, and I overheard Tate saying, I choose you, and you, and you. He was pointing at people and choosing some, and not others.

I asked him why he was choosing people, and he said, to die. I was shocked, and asked him where he got that notion. He said, Pokemon – so naturally, I forbade him from doing anything “Pokemon” – o be honest, I should have done a little research. Pokemon was not about choosing people to die -

But this is my point: I made that decision for him because I want my children to grow up respecting all people – or, as our Christian covenant asks, will you respect the dignity of every human being?

Respecting others is more of a challenge that it may appear: in this society of increasing disrespect.

Respect – or disrespect – is learned early. Children learn one or the other from families, friends, classmates, television, music, movies, books, and so on.

Children become their parents, become those they are around. They also become whatever culture they live in – and I can tell you, early and regular exposure to the Simpsons is not going to breed respect. Or Ozzie Osbourne, or 50cent.

We want our children to learn respect, but society exudes disrespect...

As my dear and wise friend Mary Ransom used to quip about teaching children, what you do speaks so loud, I can't hear what you say!

We, as Christians, must teach our children better. And my question to parents is this: do you tell your children no? Do you set boundaries? Do you exact respect from your children? (story Tilly told of seeing a child go unprimanded after yelling "shut-up" to his mom...)

Dignity applies not just to parenting, but to how we as a society treat mental illness.

These days – care for the severely mentally ill is left to families. And if there is no family, or the family does not know what to do – then the person is left to him or herself, or if the case is severe enough, the streets.

There is no dignity in this type of suffering. Especially when many illnesses can be treated ...

What I am trying to say is this: Jared should not have shot people last week – mental illness, or not.

But the situation is complex – parenting, mental illness, rhetoric. Behind each of these problems is a societal dysfunction, bearing on respect and dignity.

You can't simply fix the problem by saying, for example, improve your rhetoric – our society needs a change of heart.

Something inside, a moral foundation in which we treat the other not as object or enemy, but as opponent, as brother.

Jesus focused on each person as an individual, as the most important person in the world at that moment. In this morning's reading, Jesus looks at Peter and sees in him what nobody else could see: stability, and Jesus calls him Rock. You are now Peter – Rock.

Martin Luther King, Jr. did called those who would kill him, brothers.

We must teach respect to our children. And expect it from one another.