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Tucson tragedy reveals fruits of courage, seeds of darkness

Jamie Manson | Jan. 11, 2011 Grace on the Margins

COLUMN

It is unclear to what extent Jared Lee Loughner, the gunman who attempted to assassinate Representative Gabrielle Giffords, was influenced by the epidemic of hostile, fear-mongering rhetoric that dominates public discourse on critical issues such as health care, immigration, and Islam.

Regardless of whether Loughner?s motivation was induced by the media or mental illness, the incident compels us to take a serious look at the violent overtones of political speeches, and the ways in which misinformation and exaggerations about hot button issues strike fear and trigger aggression in the minds of listeners.

In a country that spent the last several months exploring the problem of bullying in our schools, it is time to have a public conversation about the raging, manipulative demagogues who use untruths and scare tactics for their own personal and political gain.

And no group in the U.S. should be more concerned about this than those professing to be Christians.

Perhaps the most vocal and visible preachers of rancor in our country right now are Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. But one other aspect of their lives unites them as well. They are both avowed Christians who claim that many of their political convictions are rooted in their faith.

Palin frequently draws upon violent imagery to drive home her points. As has been widely reported, she used ?crosshairs? to designate members of Congress who needed to be removed -- Giffords was in the top twenty -- and often invoked her favorite motto, ?Don?t Retreat, RELOAD!? and ?aim for Democrats? to incite the crowds.

The icon and the mantra were quickly and quietly removed from her website after Saturday?s massacre.

Palin claims to have been saved as a Christian at the age of 12. She spent her high school and college years devoted to Christian causes. She proudly attends a non-denominational church and declares herself a Bible-believing Christian. She vehemently defends the notion that the United States is a Christian nation, and frequently addresses evangelical groups. Beck?s speech at his ?Rally to Restore Honor,? sounded much more like a religious revival as he exhorted America to ?turn back to God.?

Beck?s fevered diatribes about progressivism as the ?cancer in America? that is ?eating our Constitution,? has led him to dub himself a ?hunter of progressives.? His penchant for inflammatory conspiracy theories triggered Byron Williams to plot a killing spree aimed at members of the ACLU and the Tides Foundation in July 2010.

In route to fulfilling his plan, Williams was stopped by California Highway Patrol officers. Their exchange erupted and several officers were wounded. When questioned, Williams said ?Beck would never say anything about a conspiracy, would never advocate violence. ? But he'll give you every ounce of evidence that you could

possibly need.?

A recovering alcoholic and drug addict, Beck speaks often of how the healing power of Jesus Christ allowed him to move into his new life of spiritual and financial success. Though Beck is a convert to Mormonism (he was raised Catholic), he is widely regarded as a key Christian leader because of his weaving of evangelicalism and nationalism.

Palin and Beck are just two examples of the many Christian politicians whose inflammatory, caustic rhetoric have supported and sustained the development of conservative movements such as the Tea Party.

Like Palin and Beck, Tea Partiers speak ardently about limiting government?s power, but they also insist that their Christian convictions should shape government decisions about marriage and prayer in public schools.

Somehow the U.S. Constitution became part of their Christian Apocrypha, too. It?s not a coincidence that the first session of the new, Republican controlled Congress opened with a group reading of the entire document and each of its amendments.

The Tea Party rhetoric is so influential that Congress?s first order of business this week was to repeal the hard-won health care bill.

The fact that Republicans have decided to hold off that vote in light of this weekend?s bloodshed demonstrates that they may see a connection between their alarmist speeches about ?Obamacare? and the assassination attempt on Giffords, whose life was routinely threatened when she voted in favor of the bill in March 2010.

Many Americans have become easy prey to hysteria around issues like healthcare, immigration reform, and government spending. And the irony is that some of the most vocal and visible purveyors of the frenzied and threatening language are God-fearing, church-going Christians.

They fail to recognize that trying to repeal an $850 prescription refund to seniors and a ban on denied health care coverage to sick children undermines the work of justice and compassion -- two great hallmarks of the Christian message.

What?s disturbing about ideologues like Palin and Beck isn?t that they are Christians. It?s that they use their faith to gain the support of millions throughout the country. The fact that they ?stand for God,? as one Palin devotee interviewed on *Nightline* put it recently, is a large part of their appeal.

But in reality, their caustic language and confrontational imagery perpetuates the sad legacy of twisting religious belief into an instrument of violence.

They imagine themselves as hunters in hot pursuit of evil progressives who seek justice for the sick and the stranger. Their messages and their actions could not be more inconsistent with the Gospel portrait of Jesus, whose primary mission was to liberate and care for those living on the margins.

The goals of the Palins and Becks of our world are greater self-promotion and financial gain, regardless of the price to human lives. The money and power that they amass from perpetuating vitriol discredits whatever claims they make to Christian roots and beliefs.

As Christians, we need to find words and create images that make it clear that the Christianity of Palin, Beck, and their ilk is a perversion of the Gospel message.

In response to the anger and venom that they stir, we must respond with the righteous indignation that Jesus modeled for us. We must demonstrate that bringing Christian values into our society is not a self-centered, self-

aggrandizing activity, but rather, is only realized in humble, God-centered service to our communities.

It is remarkable that all of those who perished in Tucson were, in their own way, deeply committed to public service: a congressional aide whose work as outreach director for Giffords was distinguished by his commitment to peace-making and championing those in need; a federal judge who worked tirelessly to ensure fair treatment in his district and who, in one of his judicial actions, took any extraordinary risk to go against widespread anti-immigrant sentiment and allow Mexicans to pursue a lawsuit; three senior citizens who touched their communities deeply with their volunteer work, outreach to those in need and neighborliness; a nine year old girl, who with her preternatural maturity and intelligence, dedicated time to a children?s charity and had a deep interest in public service.

In an uncanny coincidence, the girl was born on September 11, 2001, and was always viewed by those who knew her as a sign of hope that emerged in the midst of destruction, terror and tragedy.

Regardless of their religious beliefs, all of these victims led lives of courage, compassion and service that brought greater grace and light to our country, and in doing so, honored true moral conviction.

The ideologues who claim to have their roots in Christianity but plant seeds of darkness and strife have much to learn from the fruit born by the lives of these fallen individuals.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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