A SURPRISE GIFT

On Christmas morning John’s gospel shouts good news all the way from Easter’s empty tomb: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:5). The people of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Gilroy “heard” that good news through a surprise gift that arrived in early November from people they didn’t even know. The gift? 1,000 paper cranes, hand folded and mounted to hang in their sanctuary. Listen to the letter from the gift-giver, First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, explaining the reason for the gift and its history.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ of the Church of the Good Shepherd,

We were saddened to hear about the act of gun violence...at the Gilroy Garlic Festival on July 28. We want you to know that our church is holding you in our hearts. We pray that God’s comfort has surrounded your community, and that you may find hope in this time. Since we heard about this tragedy our church has been diligently putting together a flock of 1,000 peace cranes to bless and hopefully help you heal...

As a community that has gone through its own journey of pain and sorrow after the fatal shootings in Isla Vista near UC-Santa Barbara in May 2014, we stand with you in this difficult time. We send you this flock as a sign and testament to our hope for peace in our world,
and our faith that violence does not have the last word.

These cranes carry on a legacy that began some years ago. After the 2012 Sandy Hook School shootings in Newtown, CT, a flock of cranes from Pilgrim Christian Church (UCC) in Chardon, OH, arrived at the Newtown Congregational Church. The Chardon community had been through its own tragedy, and during their dark days had received cranes from Saron United Church of Christ in Sheboygan, WI. Newtown then sent their flock off to Old South Church in Boston after the 2013 Marathon bombing, and then folded a new flock of cranes that were sent to us in Santa Barbara after the Isla Vista shootings.

This flock has been blessed in our service of worship, and now we send it to you. We pray these cranes will nest with you as long as needed, but also trust that you will let them fly away when another congregation or community faces an act of gun violence.... We hope that one day these cranes will no longer have to migrate for the cause of peace.

Finally, “may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge of God.” May God protect you, watch over you, and sustain you on your journey toward healing.

From the members and friends of First Congregational Church (UCC) of Santa Barbara.

Pastor Ron Koch told his Gilroy congregation: “On Veteran’s Day we received the gift of 1,000 paper cranes, folded and mounted as a hanging for our sanctuary from First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) in Santa Barbara, CA. This was totally unexpected! A gift and a surprise! This hanging is a treasure of good news in a time of hurt in our community of Gilroy... Such a fitting gift for us to share...during this season of Advent. We know that God comes to us in the hope for renewal after the Garlic Festival shootings in July. We also experience comfort through this gift because it tells us we are not alone. God is with us through our Christian sisters and brothers in Santa Barbara and throughout the world.”

One Gilroy parishioner said, “The letter from First Congregational Church brought tears to my eyes.” Another added, “How touching of them to think of us.” Pr. Koch also expressed appreciation that Good Shepherd, Gilroy, and Advent, Morgan Hill (also impacted by the shooting), were quickly contacted by Bishop Mark and other staff, and included in the prayer list in the synod’s weekly newsletter. “It was heartwarming to know that people were aware of what happened, reached out to us, and were holding us in prayer, that the bonds of Christian love are wide and deep.”

By Carl Wilfrid
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