

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, January 10, 2021 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Two recent news stories -- the Nashville bombing on Christmas Day and the sabotage over Christmas Eve and Day of several hundred doses of Covid-19 vaccine by a pharmacist -- challenge us to figure out the reasons behind outrageous acts that seem pointless to most people. So thinking about motives and how they affect our actions will be the topic of our next class.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

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Considering Motives Behind Christmas Crimes: Destructive Blast and Vaccine Sabotage

The Wired Word for the Week of January 10, 2021

In the News

Did the man who detonated a recreational vehicle full of explosives in Nashville on Christmas Day, injuring eight people, damaging more than 40 businesses and taking down a communication network, believe conspiracy theories, including that some people are really lizards in disguise? And if so, were those beliefs his motivation for the bombing?

Investigators of the crime say the answer to the first of those questions is possibly yes. There is some evidence in the bomber's digital devices as well as in packages of material he mailed to several acquaintances on December 23 and received by them after the bombing that he did in fact believe a so-called reptilian conspiracy -- a notion that certain powerful politicians and Hollywood figures are actually lizards or other reptiles in disguise who have extraterrestrial origins and are taking over society.

The mailed materials also express the bomber's belief in conspiracy theories regarding 9/11, the moon landing and UFOs in which space aliens had purportedly begun to attack Earth in September 2011, which was covered up by the media. He wrote, in part, "Everything is an illusion" and "there is no such thing as death."

But as to the second question about whether those beliefs motivated the bombing, no one can say. The perpetrator died in the blast, and reportedly, in his writings, he never says anything to connect those beliefs to the bombing.

What's more, while his crime included some features typical of terrorist attacks (see the *USA Today* article in the links list below), the particular combination of those features he employed does not fit known terrorism attack patterns. This may reflect the fact that the bombing was not a terrorist attack as defined by the [FBI](#), [Homeland Security](#) and by most terrorism researchers, because it did not serve to advance an ideological goal by violent means. Basically, it was a crime, but not terrorism; terrorism requires a motive. (Still, we at TWW have decided in this case to follow our policy of not naming perpetrators of terrorist acts, offering them no additional notoriety.)

So for the present, at least, no definitive statement of his motives is possible and perhaps never will be. We assume he had a reason or reasons that made sense to him, even if they would not to most people, but for now, discussion of what impelled his actions on Christmas Day remains speculative.

We are only beginning to hear a motive for another crime committed over Christmas Eve and Day: the intentional ruining of hundreds of doses of Covid-19 vaccines by suburban Milwaukee pharmacist Steven Brandenburg, who has been arrested for doing so.

In the current situation with Covid-19, his action seems bizarre, but court documents released Monday say Brandenburg, who was upset because he and his wife were divorcing, believed the shots would mutate people's DNA, which vaccine experts say is untrue.

According to an affidavit filed by his wife, Brandenburg came to her house on December 6 and dropped off a water purifier and two 30-day supplies of food, telling her that the world was "crashing down" and that she was in denial about it. He said the government was planning cyberattacks and was going to shut down the power grid.

When Brandenburg was arrested on December 30, and before any motive for his action had been stated, his neighbor Darlene Scow, who saw him being arrested, told a local reporter, "It's horrible. You can't answer for somebody that has a warped mind."

A warped mind? Maybe. Brandenburg, who has admitted that he sabotaged the doses intentionally, has certainly done himself a lot of harm. A licensed pharmacist since 1997 with no record of previous investigations or disciplinary actions, he has now lost his job and probably his freedom for a while. He's ruined his reputation and is facing multiple felony charges. But without further clarity about his state of mind, it seems too early to affirm the warped mind conclusion as explaining his actions..

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Nashville Bombing: Council Honors Officers Who Responded to Blast. *Tennessean*](#)

[Nashville Bomber's Bizarre Writings Reveal Belief in Aliens and Lizard People. *NewsChannel5 Nashville*](#)

[Feds Probing Whether Nashville Bomber Believed in Lizard People Conspiracy. *NBC News*](#)

[Why the Nashville Explosion Is Confounding Terrorism Experts. *USA Today*](#)

[Employees at Suburban Milwaukee Clinic Unknowingly Gave Out 57 Shots With Deliberately Ruined Vaccine; Pharmacist Arrested. *Chicago Tribune*](#)

[Pharmacist Accused of Destroying Vaccines: No Previous Discipline. *Fox6*](#)

[Prosecutor: Wisconsin Pharmacist Thought Vaccine Was Unsafe. *ABC News*](#)

Applying the News Story

"What were they thinking?"

That question often seems important to us when we witness or hear of inexplicable harmful behavior by other human beings. We may believe that if we can just understand what led a person to make the seemingly strange choice, we may be able to head off others who might be aiming to do something similarly hurtful, either to themselves or others. And that assumption may be right some of the time, while at other times it may be a misleading hope.

The one conclusion we almost certainly need to avoid, however, is that a person's action, no matter how baffling it seems to us, is "senseless." We can be sure that their act made some kind of sense to them, even if it wouldn't to anybody else and even if it ends up being attributed to mental illness.

In "Making Sense of 'Senseless Violence,'" a chapter in the 2011 book *Emotions, Crime and Justice* (by Susanne Karstedt, Ian Loader and Heather Strang), Willem De Haan, professor of Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit (Free University), Amsterdam, The Netherlands, writes the following regarding a case of seemingly senseless lethal violence he had analyzed:

"First, the case analysis shows that there are clear reasons, even for acts which at first glance seem to be instances of 'senseless violence.' We need not necessarily condone these reasons, but we can, nevertheless, understand them. From the perspective of the perpetrator, an incident always has a clear occasion and there are usually several reasons for what to an observer may look like a random and disproportionately (violent) reaction. In a certain sense, the perpetrator experiences his actions as a necessity, the main reason being that he does not feel taken seriously, given the respect he deserves. A case analysis can show why a perpetrator commits a violent crime by showing what it meant to him to become violent and how violence helps him gain control over a situation which threatens to transform him into an object. ...

"Second, the case analysis shows that offender emotions are much more complex than is usually assumed. Although the analysis of the particular emotions of an individual perpetrator do not immediately allow us to draw firm conclusions concerning the general causes of 'senseless violence', it does provide valuable indications regarding the relative importance of the various personal and situational factors, which bring about 'senseless violence'" (from pages 51-52).

The Bible includes some people who behaved in ways that appear senseless -- or at least poorly thought out -- at first glance. This lesson gives us a change to consider what may have been motivating some of them, providing information that may help us as we seek to be Christ's people in this world

The Big Questions

1. If a harmful act makes some kind of sense to the perpetrator, does that make the person, no matter how foul the deed, something other than evil? Why or why not? How does your answer to this help us as a society? as Christians?
2. How important is it that you spend time thinking of the possible outcome of strong actions you are contemplating? How should potential collateral damage affect whether you proceed with an action or not?
3. What, if anything, helps you perceive what your real motives are?
4. Although most people would not agree with them, what possible good do you think the Nashville bomber and the Milwaukee pharmacist thought might come out of their outrageous actions?
5. What does Jesus say should be our *primary* motivations for the things we do in life? (See Matthew 22:35-40.)

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 26:14-15; 27:3-5

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. ... When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. (For context, read 26:14-50; 27:3-10).

Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, is a prime biblical target for the question "What was he thinking?" for the Bible never gives us a definitive answer. And even the few hints regarding his motive the New Testament does give are problematic:

- Both Luke 22:3 and John 13:2 say that Satan entered Judas (something Jesus affirms in John 6:70), but how does that translate to motive? Is it suggesting that Satan overrode Judas' own personality, making the disciple merely a "drone" of sorts, doing the Devil's bidding? And if Judas were not acting on his own volition, should he be held responsible for betraying Jesus?
- John 12:4-6 tells us that well before the betrayal, Judas was a thief who, when entrusted with the disciples' common purse, would steal from it. That information could be taken to explain Judas' betrayal of Jesus as an act of greed, meaning that he did it because he really wanted those 30 pieces of silver. But how does that square with Judas later trying to give the money back?
- Both John 13:18 and 17:12 speak of Judas' action as something predestined to happen, but again, that doesn't tell what was going on Judas' mind.

It's possible, of course, that Judas was afflicted with mental illness. And some Bible commentators have suggested a somewhat more benign motivation: That Judas, believing that Jesus really was the Messiah who was going to lead the Jews to freedom from the Romans, was trying to force his hand and make Jesus start the movement.

Still another possible motive, suggested by some commentators, is that Judas was trying to save Jesus from Jesus himself. (See the dramatic monolog of Judas in item #1 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.)

Any and all of these are possible motives to explain Judas' action. But in the end, we don't know for sure.

Whatever the case, note that Judas' end was the same as that of the Nashville bomber: self-annihilation.

Questions: Why do you think Judas did what he did? Considering what Judas said when trying to return the money, do you think he was expecting the outcome that occurred? Or was he simply overcome with remorse? In what ways, if any, do the speculations about Judas' motives help us when trying to understand the damaging actions of others?

What do you think the resurrected Jesus would have said to Judas had the latter stuck around long enough to find out?

Genesis 3:8-11

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (For context, read 3:1-24.)

These verses describe Adam and Eve's encounter with God after the pair had eaten the forbidden fruit. God's questions are a way of forcing them to examine their motives. The implication is not that God didn't know their motives, but that he was making the humans face the reasons for their action that was soon to have a disastrous outcome: expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

While God doesn't exactly say "What were you thinking?" the question "Where are you?" has a similar sense. And "Who told you ...? Have you eaten ...?" also goes to the heart of the reason the humans were hiding from God -- that is, their motivation.

Of course, when confronted about something we have done wrong, our first impulse is often to pass the blame or look for some way to justify our bad decision. Certainly these first humans attempted those things. The man tried to justify himself by blaming others: "The woman *whom you gave to be with me* [thus implicitly blaming God for giving him a

'defective' mate], she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate [thus explicitly blaming the woman]" (v. 12, italics added).

And the woman passed the blame to the serpent: "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." (v. 13).

The serpent at least had the sense to keep his mouth shut and not try to pass the blame back to the humans. Or perhaps he kept quiet out of satisfaction that he had achieved the goal of his motive: the separation of humankind from God.

Questions: How often do you think about your motives? When have you done something wrong but for what you considered a "good" reason? How does that self-justification now look in hindsight?

What do you think Jesus would say to you now regarding bad acts you have done and tried to justify?

James 4:1-2

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. ... (For context, read 4:1-10.)

Romans 7:15, 21

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. (For context, read 7:14-25.)

In the James verses above, James is talking about motivations that lead to bad acts -- disputes and conflicts, and even murder.

Paul is describing something similar in the Romans verses, where he speaks of his inner conflict: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He says he does not understand his actions, and we might want to read that as if he is saying those actions are "senseless." But if we read the context verses, he does state a reason: sin (vv. 20, 23).

Given this admission and the fact that he zealously persecuted Christians ("breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" -- Acts 9:1), we might wonder how prone he might have been to even senseless violence had he not undergone conversion to follow Jesus.

Questions: At least Paul had not only a voice calling him to do evil, but also a voice calling him to do good. How do we nurture that good voice in ourselves and others today? Have you ever done something that made sense at the time, but which later in life you defined as senseless? Have you ever, after a certain act, thought to yourself, "Why did I do that?" Was sin a factor, and if so, in what ways?

How do you think James and Paul would respond to Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse -- who can understand it?"

What do you think Jesus says to you now regarding your bad actions for which you cannot perceive a motive?

Galatians 1:10

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (For context, read 1:6-10.)

It is *very* important to read the context for this verse, because lots of people have committed atrocities believing they were receiving God's approval for doing so. In the context, starting with verse 6, Paul confronts the Galatian Christians about being swayed to believe a different gospel -- which, he says, is no gospel at all.

Many of the Galatian believers, who were Gentiles, had been brought to Christ through the work of Paul and his companions. Sometime later, some Jewish-Christian missionaries arrived in the region and not only questioned Paul's authority to speak for the gospel but also insisted that Paul had it wrong. Paul had not told the Galatians that to become

followers of Jesus, they first needed to be circumcised and put themselves under the Mosaic law. But these later-come missionaries insisted that they must. Naturally this caused great concern among the Galatians Christians.

This was the occasion for Paul's letter to the Galatians, to insist that the gospel as he had preached it, which said that what God had done in Christ was sufficient for their salvation was right. There was no need to first adopt a Jewish way of life and the Mosaic law.

And it is only in the context of calling them back to the gospel as he had presented it, that Paul says, he is acting under God's approval.

Questions: How can you tell when you are receiving God's approval -- versus being a "people-pleaser" or a "loose cannon" or a "God betrayer"?

What does Jesus say to you now?

For Further Discussion

1. What possible explanations for Judas' betrayal of Jesus do you see in this dramatic monolog from TWW team member Stan Purdum?

[Judas enters furtively. He looks around as though someone dangerous is following him. He wears a distraught look. Then he sees the man he's seeking.]

Caiaphas! Caiaphas! I must speak to you.

You've got to call this whole thing off. This is all a terrible mistake. Here, take the money back. *[Judas extends the purse filled with coins.]* It's all here. I haven't spent any of it. Take it back and let Jesus go.

No, wait. Don't laugh. I'm serious. I know you want Jesus out of your hair, but if you let him go, I'll get him out of town. You can trust me.

What? Yes, I know.

I deserve that. Jesus trusted me and I betrayed him, but this is different. Don't you see? I ... I ... Well, I love Jesus, so you can trust me to keep him out of your way.

I don't blame you for laughing. It must sound ludicrous to say that I love him, but you've got to understand: I thought I was helping him.

When I first joined up with Jesus, I was impressed with his message. Jesus healed people and spoke of peace and righteousness. Even you, Caiaphas, would have been pleased with some of what he did.

But as time went along, I began to detect a dangerous note in his teachings. Some of the people in the crowds started to speak of him as if he were one of the prophets resurrected, or even the Son of God. Jesus began saying things that made me suspect he was starting to believe what people were saying about him. My comrades -- those you call his disciples -- encouraged him too.

But you understand, Caiaphas, the other disciples are Galileans. I'm the only Judean among Jesus' inner circle. Being a Judean yourself, you understand about Galileans -- how emotional and unstable they are.

I realized then that I was the only one who saw what was really happening. Jesus changed. In the beginning, he was only asking people to repent of their sins, but as time went on, he developed a Messiah complex. I became afraid of what he might do. And, it was up to me to stop him.

Then we came here to Jerusalem and Jesus rode in on a donkey. He allowed the crowds to praise him and proclaim that he was coming in the name of the Lord. Right then I knew that Jesus had finally slipped over the edge.

Something had to be done, but before I had time to act, Jesus did something even more outrageous. He took us all with him to the temple where he saw the money changers and animal sellers taking a profit -- perhaps some got a bit excessive -- but I'm not complaining, I understand about business and money. In fact, I think that's why Jesus made me the treasurer, the keeper of the purse for our group.

But Jesus snapped. He took a whip and drove all those businessmen out. I know that upset you. I saw you watching and could tell by the look on your face that you were outraged.

It was you, Caiaphas, who gave me the idea of what to do. I realized you wanted to stop Jesus as much as I did, even if not for the same reasons. So I decided to help you.

I thought about just coming to you and explaining but I knew you didn't trust Jesus and might think it was a trick. But then it came to me! If I could convince you that I was betraying Jesus, then you'd believe me. And what better way to appear disloyal than to ask for money.

But it was never about the money. I didn't care about that. Here -- take it back.

I don't want it.

I never wanted it.

I admit I deceived you, so take me instead.

I'll die in his place -- God, I *want* to die -- but let him go.

Please! I only cooperated with you to get Jesus out of the way so he wouldn't get in any more trouble. I never thought you'd want to kill him.

[A change comes over Judas. He begins to look more wild-eyed.]

Caiaphas, you can still stop this. It's not too late. But we must hurry because they're after me. They'll get me if I stay here too long.

What do you mean, who are *they*? They -- you know -- the destroyers, the ones who eat your insides.

Waaaait a minute! [*Judas points at Caiaphas.*] *You're one of them!* You're trying to trick me too. They have already destroyed my soul. I did the right thing, so why must they haunt me?

Oh, but that's it, don't you see? Devils can't stand for a person to do the right thing, so they attack. [*Now Judas talks as though speaking to himself.*] I wish Jesus were here. He'd know what to do. He'd drive them out. I've seen him do it before.

Well, what are you staring at Caiaphas? ... Caiaphas. [*Judas looks at the purse, which brings him back to reality.*] My God, what have I done?

Caiaphas, you must stop this thing. Jesus doesn't deserve to die. Here, take the money. I'll get more money. I'll pay you. Stop this insanity! Please! Please! It wasn't supposed to turn out this way.

Take the money. Don't leave. Wait. Take the money! *Take the damned money!* [*Judas flings the money down the aisle after the retreating Caiaphas.*]

My God. I've killed the one I love. I've killed Jesus.

I've killed him.

[*Judas exits, a broken man.*]

2. Here are some other "What were they thinking" persons in the Bible. Say what you think was motivating them in these verses:

- "Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear; but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. David fled and escaped that night" (1 Samuel 19:10).
- "James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory'" (Mark 10:35-37).
- "But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD"(Jonah 1:3).
- "Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. ... The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water.' ... Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them'" (Numbers 20:2, 7-8, 10-12).
- "Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Exodus 32:2-4).
- "We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12).

Responding to the News

This is a good time to resolve to let all our actions be guided by what Jesus said were the great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

You might find value in reading the forthcoming book from TWW team member Bill Tammeus, titled *Love, Loss and Endurance: A 9/11 Story of Resilience and Hope in an Age of Anxiety*. The penultimate chapter explores the question of how people get sucked into radical thinking that can, and often does, lead to violence. (Surely the 9/11 terrorist attacks caused many of us to try to figure out the reasons behind those outrageous acts.) The book will be published January 19.

Prayer

O Lord, help us to be clear thinkers who operate toward others out of love for you and for them. And help us to avoid the distortions that say we are justified in harming others because of love for you or them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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