

Just a little more than a week ago, Robert Bowers, a man filled with hate, walked into The Tree of Life synagogue and took the lives of 11, and wounded 6 more before being taken into custody. After he yelled "I want to kill all the Jews," he was actually treated by Jewish doctors and nurses at a nearby hospital.

While that act of violent hate made headlines, what also made headlines was the outpouring of support from people of all faiths for the victims. Two Muslim groups even raised more than \$115,000 for the injured and the families of those killed, all because they decided to respond to hate with love.

This kind of thing is nothing new. Twenty-three years ago, Billings, Montana was dealing with hate crimes. Billings is known as a place with great schools and strong family values. So it came as a shock to many when, in November of 1995, a series of hate crimes took place against minority groups in the city.

Whoever was responsible for these acts must have thought their victims were easy targets. Billings is predominantly white; Native Americans, African Americans and Jews make up only a small percentage of the population. But there are just enough of them to frighten and harass - or so the haters must have thought.

They mounted a series of nasty attacks. Graves were overturned in a Jewish cemetery. Offensive words and a swastika were scrawled on the house of a Native American woman. People worshipping at a black church were intimidated. A brick was heaved through the window of a Jewish child who displayed a menorah there.

But the white supremacists, or whoever they were, had reckoned without the citizens of Billings, who had an answer for them, and it wasn't what the hate-mongers were expecting. An alliance quickly emerged, spearheaded by churches, labor unions, the media and hundreds of local citizens.

The results were dramatic. Attendance at the black church rose steadily. People of many different ethnic backgrounds and faiths began to attend services there. Their message was clear: "We may be all different, but we are one also. Threaten any one of us and you threaten us all."

A similar spirit propelled volunteers to come together and repaint the house of Dawn Fast Horse, the Native American woman. This happened at amazing speed. Dawn had awoken one morning to see her house had been defaced. By the evening, after two hundred people showed up to help, the house had been repainted.

When it came to the incident of the brick being thrown through the window of the Jewish child, an interfaith group quickly had a creative idea. They recalled the example of the Danes during World War II. When the Nazis tried to round up Danish Jews into concentration camps for subsequent extermination, the Danish people worked quickly, within a two-week period, to transport almost every Danish Jew to safety in Sweden until the end of the war.

So the people of Billings organized, and a campaign began. Everyone pitched in, including the local newspaper, which printed a Hanukkah page, including a full-color representation of a menorah. Thousands of Billings residents cut the paper menorah out and displayed it in their windows. By late December, driving around Billings was a remarkable experience. Nearly ten thousand people were displaying those paper menorahs in their windows, and the menorahs remained in place throughout the 8 days of Hanukkah. It was a brilliant answer to the hate-mongers: A town that had a few Jews was saying with one collective voice, "We are all Jews now."

The story of what happened in Billings quickly spread, inspiring a national movement called "Not in Our Town." That Jewish child who had so innocently displayed her menorah in the window helped set in motion a chain of events that affirmed all over America the principle of unity in diversity.

It's an important principal that we all need to remember, but one that can be hard to live out. Jesus in our Gospel summarizes all of the commandments into loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourself. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies, probably because they are generally the same people."

Most all of us can look at what happened in Pennsylvania and recognize it for evil. But love of neighbor can be an incredible challenge too. It's a lot easier to love faraway victims of disasters through a donation than to love those close to us; family members who have hurt us or let us down, irritating, know-it-all relatives, or people whose political opinions are the opposite of ours. But despite our divisions and the ugliness that can sometimes result, time and time again we see situations like Billings or in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania where the love shone so much more brightly than the hate. How then can we make this a true way of life?

For starters, it goes back to something I mentioned a few weeks ago, what Saint John Paul II called the "personalistic norm." Basically stated, it says: "The person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such the means to an end" and "the person is the kind of good towards which the only proper and attitude is love." This comes from John Paul's great work "Love and Responsibility" which is about human relationships and sexuality. It means that with respect to the body, we don't separate body and soul which is what happens through lust, pornography, etc, and we take these things seriously. But it also needs to guide us in all we do. Some people are hard to love. But when we have this norm guide us, we can see all people through the eyes of Christ, who died for us all, not just for some of us. We always need to start by looking at someone and seeing them as created in God's image, and letting that be what we think about first and foremost.

Second, we need to pray for others. Even before Mass last week, as the shooting occurred just that day, and I mentioned that I was going to ad lib a petition for the victims, the person I mentioned it to had the insight to say "why not pray for the shooter too?" And they were right. He too needed prayer. We all need prayer. But a good

starting point is when we look at people who are tough to love, from the gunman to people who impact our families like your child's bully, the relative who is mean, or maybe a politician you don't like, we might have anger at that person, but can we at least pray for them. What would Jesus recommend, to want to see them to rot forever or pray for them? Which has the better chance of bringing about their conversion?

Third, we need to look at resentment. Nursing resentments is like eating rotten food in hopes that the other person will get sick and, therefore, learn to mend his or her ways. What is it we need to let go of? Maybe a person is just not going to change their ways or is oblivious. Maybe we harbor anger at something from the past, or are fed up with a person's actions or inactions, or just frustrated with a person's politics or lack of care about their faith. Whatever it might be, being more and more resentful doesn't help the situation. Perhaps we need to forgive that person. Or if it's just a strong difference of opinion dialogue and discussion can help - as I've said before I am strong in my faith and political beliefs, but if one talks with rather than shouts at someone at least we might find common ground and have a better understanding of one another.

Fourth, love of neighbor also entails action. The people of Billings, the people who were the neighbors of the Tree of Life Synagogue, both came together and acted in the face of evil. If we truly love our neighbor, we can't stay silent when we see a bully at school or the workplace. We can't stay silent when at dinner someone attacks the Catholic faith or what we believe because we don't want to make someone feel uncomfortable. We can't stay silent when we suspect abuse in the family. We can't stay silent when it seems someone is making some bad decisions. Actions, as I noted on All Saints Day, can sometimes be quite costly for us too and cause people to turn on us, but they can also do so much to help someone and turn a situation around.

Lastly, it's also important to embrace tolerance. Tolerance is not an excuse for inaction or not speaking up. It doesn't mean we don't live out the work of mercy to admonish the sinner and instruct the ignorant. But tolerance is where we accept the fact that good people can have very different views and still have some common ground and even some type of relationship. Perhaps its politics, and odds are you have a friend or family member who is quite opposite than you. You may be at a point where you have to agree to disagree on some things, but hopefully tolerate one another's view and don't see that person as the enemy. Or maybe a person is ignorant and can't see why the Church teaches as She does on a matter of faith and morals. Other times it's something like a family member who may be living a lifestyle not in accordance with the Church. I think it's important to reject sin, not the sinner. By not shutting this person out of your life or being focused on "fixing" them, we can make greater inroads. Our kindness, our patience, even if the other person may be trying to get under our skin, can in the long run set the stage for deeper conversations and hopefully even conversion. Sometimes though due to impatience we can just get angrier and angrier with those who are spiritually blind and forget that we need to be like Saint Monica who spent many years praying for her son Augustine to convert and change his ways. A little tolerance can produce amazing fruit.

As we prepare to receive Communion, we are again reminded how deeply God is in love with us. He comes to us always, and helps us through our sins and struggles, and tolerates our mistakes. Hopefully we truly love Him above all else and reach out to Him, but also remember that He gives us a commission - to take the love that we receive from Him and to bring it into the world. So many in the world are hard to love. We see such anger and hate around us from the news to every time we look at a crucifix as we see what hate can do. But the paradox of the crucifix is that it is also a sign not just of what hate does, but what love does when it triumphs over hate. That should be our guide. God looks at us and sees past our evilness and sees the potential that is in all of us that shouldn't just come out when there is a tragedy. Loving God means daily growing in grace and holiness and away from sin and putting Him first in our lives. Loving neighbor means not just loving those who are our best friends or a newborn infant - loving neighbor means, as we pray in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, "loving them to the end." Tough business indeed. But in heaven are so many people who walked away from lives where they made bad decisions all because love replaced sin and hate in their lives. So who do we need to forgive, to reach out to, to be more tolerant of? Who is Jesus challenging us to pray for or to extend an olive branch to? As we come up to welcome Jesus into hearts, let us go forth this day to strive to be like the shepherd who went after the lost sheep, loving without exception, mindful that when we do we will one day be with perhaps the most unexpected around the heavenly altar having transformed others with the love that transformed us.