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Community Members,

What a tough time we are having as a nation right now! The most recent example is the tragic and senseless killing of children and teachers in Uvalde, Texas. Over and over, our country experiences preventable tragedies. As a parent – and grandparent – I cannot imagine the depths of the pain the victims' families are experiencing now; the scars that will never fully heal.

Can we agree that we have a deep and serious problem, of which the result is preventable tragedies? The root causes are most likely varied and complex. Sometimes we are let in behind the curtain and can identify the cause, but other times we are left to guess. Isolation? Bullying? Broken families? Mental health? Racial, cultural, sexual differences? We simply can't and don't know each situation. But, we know the outcome is devastating.

Now, we obviously differ about the steps that should be taken to address this. But we cannot bury our heads in the sand and deny the fact that we have more gun deaths per capita than any other developed nation – and more guns than any other country. And we cannot deny the fact that we haven't been able to stop these senseless tragedies, tragedies that undermine our moral authority in the eyes of much of the rest of the world (certainly of our democratic allies). If we really want to be a beacon of light to the rest of the world, we should figure this out, and soon. It is a tragedy of our own making, and it is up to us to find solutions. Or we should be honest with ourselves that what we've tried isn't working because this continues to happen, and we should look for solutions beyond what we've tried.

We've seen that crimes rooted in hate of those who are different from us, whether by the color of their skin, their religion, their nationality, their sexual self-identification, or other differences, have all been on the rise. The second anniversary of the murder of George Floyd is this week. We saw this exhibited in the massacre at the supermarket in Buffalo. And this may have been the reason for the massacre of children in Texas this week.

There is a term for such acts of violence. We call them hate crimes. And while that may be technically true, I don't think it is the best descriptor. How can we say we hate someone we have never met? How can we say we hate someone who has been a productive contributor to their community? How can we truly hate someone who has never done even one tiny negative action against us directly? Really? Are these hate crimes? I think they are better classified as "fear crimes." Fear is a tremendous motivator. Fear kicks us into our flight or fight mode. Fear is not rational, does not need to be based on objective facts or even on actual treatment we have received by someone. It is easily manipulated precisely because it can bypass our rational thought process. This is why fear is so very dangerous. Hate flows from this fear. Hate based on nothing more real than a perceived threat fed by those who gain from manipulating our fears. Listen carefully to the discourse that is occurring in our society. How much of it is based upon fear? And if fear is our motivator, (i.e. self-preservation), then our response can be unspeakable violence to eliminate the threat.

We see our problem with so many mass shootings typified by these two most recent examples. Is it a coincidence that we are also becoming a fear-based society? We see this in actions from political parties



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to various ideologies which capitalize on fear to motivate their followers. Simply put, nothing will get you “more bang for the buck” than stoking someone’s fear to respond.

Our differences are not what threaten us. The real threat is allowing fear to be our approach to those differences. And nothing will destroy our society more quickly and thoroughly than when we chose to fear one another. It is no wonder that enemies of our society have spent so much time and energy to sow this discord rooted in fear of one another. They know, better than we seem to, that this is the best way to destroy us. They don’t need weapons. They just need to get us to turn on each other.

The antidote to such a culture based on fear is really quite simple. Chose love – of one another, of your community, of people. That’s not a flippant, nor an easy, choice. But it is about making a conscious decision to care for those both the same and different from ourselves. To see in those differences not a threat, but rather an opportunity to learn and grow. Seek to respond positively to the person who is different or even difficult.

Interestingly enough, we have built our economy here in Leavenworth on just that principle. Hospitality is nothing less that treating each and every person with care, respect, and genuine interest in who they are as a human person. Nationality, color, or politics don’t matter. People enjoy coming here because it is a beautiful place where they are treated as beloved friends and family. That “willkommen” hospitality is an increasingly rare commodity, and one which people will flock to. All it would take to heal this great land of ours is if we choose to treat everyone as if they were guests in our home, and our highest calling was to make them feel as if our home was their home. Can we do it? Good question. But I know our culture of fear is not working. Let’s choose another way, the “willkommen,” Leavenworth way.

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