It hardly seems possible that hate-filled bigotry has raised its ugly head once again at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and in a shopping center in Jeffersontown, Kentucky. Sadly, these horrific murders of Jewish and Black people are even more insidious since they happened in a place of worship or, as in the latter case of Maurice Stallard and Vickie Jones, the victims were gunned down because the perpetrator was not able to gain access to a predominantly Black church. As we read the brief biographies of the victims, we see people very much like ourselves, fellow citizens, brothers and sisters with God as our Father, whose lives were tragically cut short by persons consumed with irrational hatred and inexplicable animosity for people different from themselves. We must wonder who these butchers saw at the other end of their guns. How did their vision become so blurred?

When did they begin their path of vitriol and distortion? We may never get answers to those questions but we certainly do well to ask ourselves who we see when we encounter people different from ourselves. I am not suggesting that we are in the same boat as these murderers, but we are kidding ourselves if we believe we are free of prejudice or that we are not inclined to be suspicious of certain people in our lives? It is precisely these prejudices that can make it difficult for us to follow Christ’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the whole point of our Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite, two good and religious men, ignored the victim of robbers, even going so far as to cross over to the other side of the street. It was the Samaritan, a person who would have been despised by Christ’s audience, who showed compassion and genuine love of neighbor. The two passers-by saw someone who was a threat either by compromising their ritual purity by putting them in touch with unclean wounds or by getting involved with or even blamed for a crime or by forcing them to go out of their way or by being a member of a despised group of people. The Samaritan, however, saw a fellow human being in need of help. He saw a child of God and was filled with compassion. The Greek word used by Luke for “compassion” is splagchnizomai. It means to be moved as to one’s gut, one’s bowels, where the ancients believed that love and pity resided. This is what Jesus has in mind when he calls us to love our neighbor, to see others as he sees them. We are called to cut through all our filters and prejudices in order to see people as they are, unique, unrepeatable children of God who God loves beyond telling and to have compassion for them deep within ourselves.

This is how St. Oscar Romero saw people: as God sees them. I am told he defined Catholic social justice as that body of Church teaching that “looks at God looking at the poor.” In other words, he believed we are to see others through the eyes of God, with the eyes of God and in the eyes of God. This takes faith, a faith that enables me to transform my vision from a prejudiced perspective to one that embraces all persons as recipients of God’s love and as my fellow sojourners on the road to union with God the Father. This describes a vision formed by faith, enlivened by faith and guided by faith. I am reminded of a famous National Geographic photographer who was once asked how he took such gorgeous pictures. He responded, “Most people say, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ I say, ‘I see it because I believe it.’” It is when we have faith that we can begin to see with the eyes of Christ and we can see things we never thought possible in our fellow human beings.

I am not sure why we are sometimes incapable of seeing others as God sees them, as they are meant to be seen. Maybe it is due to ignorance that we judge an entire race of people based on one experience or one myopic perception. Or, perhaps it is due to low self-esteem that makes us put others down so they we feel better about ourselves. Or, it could be just sheer meanness as that which is found in bullies, dictators and the arrogant. I suppose it could also be mental illness or a combination of any of these or other possibilities. But
whatever the cause, our faith in Jesus has
the power to transform our limited, fearful
and clannish perspective into a broader,
kinder and more generous one that enfolds
others into a loving embrace that moves
beyond petty jealousies or deep-seated
hatred.

The events at the end of October have
now joined the ever growing list of other
such tragedies in which innocent lives
have been lost, leaving us to deal with the
grim aftermath of systemic and personal
bigotry that gives way to violence. While
we may feel powerless in the face of such
heartbreaks, there is much we can do to
stem the tide of violence in our country.
We can advocate for more comprehensive
mental health interventions, for effective
gun safety laws and for better education
of our young people in the area of social
justice. We can certainly pray for solutions
to these intractable problems. And we
can make sure that our own vision is not
clouded by the stain of prejudice. We can
see the homeless person on the street
corner not as a nuisance but as a fellow
human being in need of compassion; we
can look upon immigrants not as “illegals”
but as human beings struggling to find a
safe haven; we can envision the elderly not
as burdens but as wise mentors who reflect
the wisdom of their years; and we can
encounter the stranger not as a threat but
as a gift from God.

There is an ancient Jewish story about
several rabbis arguing over the time of
the Sabbath’s beginning. One rabbi was
convinced that midnight is the correct
answer. Another was certain that it begins
at sunset. Still another believed that the
Sabbath begins at dawn. Finally, one elderly
and very wise rabbi spoke up and said that
the Sabbath begins when there is enough
light to see into your neighbor’s eyes.
May Christ, who is the Light of the World,
enlighten our vision that we may see each
other as God sees us: as unique, lovable
human beings, created to be one with God
forever in heaven. Let’s try to see each
other that way. So many tragedies could be
avoided if we all did.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

Most Rev. John C, Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe