

How do we preach about a vigilante murder?

As preachers consider their response to the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, a sermon from the Gilded Age might guide the way.

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Century illustration (Source image: Getty)

On December 4, a masked shooter killed Brian Thompson, chief executive of UnitedHealthcare, in Midtown Manhattan. The shooting, coupled with the discovery of bullet casings at the scene with the words *delay*, *deny*, and *depose* on them,

prompted an online frenzy. *New York Times* columnist Zeynep Tufekci [details](#) the celebratory public response in the days after the shooting, from viral posts delighting in the killing to rage-filled posts describing the agony caused by health insurance companies. Observing that never before has social media so openly celebrated a murder in the United States, Tufekci suggests parallels to the public discontent and political violence characteristic of the Gilded Age in the late 19th century. Following the discovery that the alleged killer was carrying a [two-page document](#) protesting the healthcare industry, the conversation is far from over. The document includes the words, “These parasites had it coming.”

It is difficult to know how to preach after an event like this, a horrific killing that reveals and lacerates an already deep, seeping wound. But this is not the first time preachers have been challenged to offer a word in the aftermath of a public killing imbued with the symbolic weight of public outrage at an unjust system.

On September 15, 1901, Methodist minister and labor activist Harry F. Ward took to the pulpit of 47th Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago. The day before, President William McKinley had died as a result of a shooting by anarchist and laborer Leon Czolgosz. Ward, who would later become the first national chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union, devoted his entire life’s work to economic justice, fair working conditions, and the advancement of the social gospel. The sermon he preached the day after McKinley’s death—a transcript of which is held in the Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary—is instructive for us today.

Addressing a congregation located in an Eastern European immigrant neighborhood—a congregation disposed to sympathy with Czolgosz’s anger about economic inequality—Ward began his sermon with an unequivocal denouncement of the assassination, which he believed struck at the very principles of social progress. He asked, “What is the world coming to?” and lamented the philosophy of violent anarchism. Yet he also maintained that it was the “duty of the pulpit to create and maintain intelligent public opinion on questions of government.” For Ward, this meant that the preacher could not just address the assassination but must also speak to the underlying social conditions that bred it.

He pressed the ways in which the current economic and cultural conditions fed an anarchism that many Americans tried to pin on the influx of immigrants rather than on their own state. He lifted up the experience of the average laborer in the United States, prompting his congregation to imagine “the slum in which he lives,”

ordinances broken in his house, his street, the saloon. Laws used by certain persons any way they please. The police with no respect[t] for the law . . . arrests and imprisonment without due process of law . . . lawlessness in lynchings, in tax dodgings . . . the privileges of corporations.

Because despotism and oppression fueled anarchy, Ward concluded, “to let the rich man run church and state, is surely to breed the anarchist tribe and spirit.”

Ward’s sermon toed a careful line, both condemning Czolgosz’s action (and the anarchist philosophy beneath it) and calling attention to the corrupt living conditions in America that led to it. The accent of Ward’s sermon, however, was on neither the killer nor the one killed. Instead he emphasized empathy for those who experience firsthand the oppression of unjust systems. Ward advocated in this sermon—as he did in many others—for the slow implementation of the kingdom of God in society, in order to change the conditions that created a desperate situation in the first place.

While Czolgosz was representative of the very class of laborers disadvantaged by the wealth disparity of the Gilded Age, Thompson’s alleged killer stands apart. His wealthy family and Ivy League education make the historical comparison a little murkier. In this case the public can’t necessarily imagine a sympathetic biography that speaks to the economic nightmare foisted on many Americans by the health care industry. And yet the wound opened up by the assassination of Thompson continues to bleed.

Today, if preachers are to offer a word after the killing of a health care industry executive, they must chart a precarious course between Scylla and Charybdis. A refusal to understand the catharsis that many Americans have expressed online is a refusal of empathy, indicative of being out of touch with the average citizen. At the same time, failing to distinguish between celebration and catharsis obfuscates the very spirit of social reform needed to name the injustices of the healthcare industry.

It is generative to ask how we got to a point where UnitedHealthcare’s Facebook post about the killing of Thompson was met mostly with laughing emojis. What are the conditions that led to the widespread celebration of a murder? Following Ward, we might begin to answer these questions by lifting up and empathizing with the experiences of average Americans under our healthcare system: high deductibles, routine denial of claims, lack of coverage for necessary medical procedures,

inconsistency in quality of care, lengthy bureaucratic processes that delay medical treatment, and bankruptcy from outrageous medical debt. Not to mention the countless deaths for which the health care industry itself is responsible.

It is the duty of the pulpit to speak to the unjust conditions of a social structure that can lead a populace to delight in murder. As in Ward's sermon, however, the accent should fall on empathy for those most affected by the health care industry's failures—and on demanding an account for how we got here. The celebration of vigilantes does not occur in a vacuum. Let the preacher ask: What has bred this spirit?