



A poster is seen Dec. 5 attached to a lamppost outside the Hilton hotel near the scene where the CEO of UnitedHealthcare Brian Thompson was ambushed and shot dead the day before in New York City's midtown Manhattan neighborhood. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Segar)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

December 11, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The degree to which America is no longer a Christian culture in any meaningful way was on full display in two news stories from New York City that dominated the headlines this past week: The [murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson](#) and the [trial of Daniel Penny](#) in the killing of Jordan Neely.

The Network Contagion Research Institute [reported](#) that out of the top 10 most engaged posts on Twitter/X that mention Thompson or UnitedHealthcare, six "either expressed explicit or implicit support for the killing or denigrated the victim."

The health insurance industry is not going to win a popularity award anytime soon. An argument could be made that the American people have no one to blame for our dystopian health insurance system when you consider that they always fall for the fear-mongering against "socialized medicine" hurled against any proposals that would minimize or eliminate the profit motive from health care delivery. But the industry deserves its share of the blame too.

Thompson was only 50 years old. [He left behind a wife and two sons](#). Did that wife and those boys deserve to lose her husband and their father?

If someone wanted to make the case that Thompson was personally responsible for the denial of health care, they should write an op-ed in the Times or take Thompson to court and argue the case. No one is entitled to empower themselves to be the prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner of a fellow citizen, no matter what the supposed underlying crime was.

We do not know much about the suspect yet. Perhaps he is mentally unstable. What about the hundreds of thousands of people making social media posts that championed the murderer?

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro [confronted](#) the callous attempts to make the suspect a hero. "I have no tolerance, nor should anyone, for one man using an illegal ghost gun to murder someone because he thinks his opinion matters most. In a civil

society, we are all less safe when ideologues engage in vigilante justice," Shapiro said. "In some dark corners, this killer is being hailed as a hero. Hear me on this: He is no hero."

## Advertisement

The trial of Penny was tailor-made to exacerbate the culture wars. Penny, a white former Marine, placed Neely, a Black, mentally ill homeless man, in a chokehold that led to his death. Multiple eyewitnesses acknowledged that Neely had been acting in a threatening and erratic manner. The case before the jury was whether Penny was so indifferent to Neely's life that his attempt to restrain him amounted to criminally negligent homicide. The jury ruled that it did not.

Outside the courtroom, Black Lives Matter protesters [chanted](#), "Hey, hey, what do you say? Daniel Penny has got to pay!"

Fox News covered the trial incessantly, turning Penny into a folk hero. Primetime host Laura Ingraham [called out](#) New York District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who brought the charges against Penny, and others who argued that the DA was right to bring charges. Ingraham linked Bragg's handling of the Penny case to his bringing charges against Donald Trump.

"Of course, Democrats will almost always side with thugs," Ingraham told her viewers, "against patriots." If you watch the full clip, Ingraham rolls clips of liberals saying outrageous things also.

Lost in the tug of war over the culture war narrative was the double tragedy of one young man being killed and another young man having to go through life knowing he has killed another human being. A Marine may shoot another person, or launch a missile that kills several, but Penny used his bare hands against Neely. He may be legally innocent, but what does that knowledge do to a person?

In his encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#), Pope Francis wrote, "What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy, since we have no time to waste on other people's problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering."

MSNBC and Fox will give you an ideologically driven narrative of virtually any event, but they reserve their empathy for people who agree with them, demonize those who don't, providing fodder to those who want to join one side or the other in the culture wars. They refuse to stop, pause, and consider the human reality that is in front of them, to find empathy with those who do not fit their narrative.

The remedy the pope prescribes is simple: "Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond."

Before we Americans can overcome the polarization that plagues our politics, we need to reawaken the moral sensibilities that keep us from reducing human tragedies to culture war talking points. We need to rediscover first our capacity for compassion.