

“Thoughts and Prayers”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Introduction:

Today I might make somebody mad. That’s not my intention. Some people say they don’t want to hear politics from the pulpit. But what we call “politics” is really just the way we deal with real problems in our community like hunger, and health care and justice for all through a system of government.

Issues that are “political” are really issues of life, and Jesus dealt with those kinds of issues, too. So just because elected officials have politicized an issue, doesn’t mean Jesus wasn’t concerned about it too. I say this because last week while I stood here talking to you about Mary and Martha and about making time to sit at the feet of the master to learn from Jesus, news was breaking of a mass shooting in Dayton; this just hours after news came of a mass shooting in El Paso Texas.

We need to talk about that. We need to turn to Jesus for guidance. There is no better time than while sitting in the presence of God to do that.

Today I might make somebody mad. But that is not my intention. I hope if I do, you will take the time to talk with me about it.

First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 2:2-4

²In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:47-56

⁴⁷While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁵²Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” ⁵⁵At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.



Sermon: “Thoughts and Prayers”

It is impossible to really get your head around something so horrific as what happened last weekend. By now you’ve no doubt heard the lurid details, so I won’t repeat them here. Members of the media try to communicate the depth and breadth of the tragedy by repeating over and over the numbers of dead and wounded and shots fired, and with bombastic statements like “worst in American history,” but it’s hard to really comprehend the violation, and the loss...

As I prepared this week I prayed and struggled and sought after the right words to say. When the unimaginable happens, it is difficult to find the right words. In my reading and study this week, heaven knows I’ve found a bunch of the wrong words. In the end I found more questions than answers...

Why does our all-powerful and all loving God, who I believe with all my heart does not want evil to touch our lives, allow things to happen like what happened last weekend?

Why do people choose to solve their problems with violence?

Why must the innocent so often pay for the sins of the guilty?

Why must the people of the world continually see one another as “them; the other; different”? And why must we choose to assign the worst motives to those who we see as different?

Why do the strong so often mock and oppress the weak and why do the weak so often choose to feel powerful through violence?

I wish I could say that I wrote those words this week while pondering the gun violence in Dayton and El Paso and Gilroy. But I didn't. I'm sad to say the preceding paragraphs were written for a sermon I preached the Sunday after 32 people were murdered by a single gunman at Virginia Tech University.

That was in April of 2007.

Here we are over a decade later and those words are just as relevant today as they were then. Over the years the list of communities touched by gun violence has only grown. Yet nothing seems to change. Which is understandable. We are a nation divided at least in part because we seem unable to step outside ourselves and see issues of importance from a different perspective. We tend to consume media that comforts us and reaffirms our viewpoints rather than informing and challenging our understandings.

But when we as Christians are at a loss for what to do next, we turn back to Jesus. And to be honest, Jesus doesn't talk about guns. Obviously, because they didn't have them back then. But he does talk about violence. And he does talk about the tools of violence. And he seems to think relying on them is a bad idea.

In our reading from Matthew we heard the story of Jesus' arrest. A crowd of people “from the chief priests and the elders of the people” come to the Garden of Gethsemane, led there by Judas, for the purpose of arresting Jesus. Jesus has predicted that he will die at their hands.¹ His disciples have reason to be concerned for his safety. As Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss and the men move in to grab Jesus, one of his disciples pulls a sword and strikes one of the servants of the high priest, slicing off his ear.

This story is told in all four gospels and despite some variation, all agree that someone took a sword and cut off someone's ear. Mark says it was “one of those who stood near,”² but Matthew³ and Luke⁴ agree that it was one of the group who was with Jesus. John takes it a step further and identifies the culprit as none other than our impetuous, wrong as often as he is right, Peter.⁵ Bless his heart.

Mark doesn't describe Jesus' reaction to the violence, but Luke, Matthew and John all agree that Jesus called for it to stop immediately.⁶ And Matthew records Jesus chastising the swordsman saying, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” Jesus then heals the wounded man. We see here Jesus' commitment to non-violence. This is an excellent argument for why weapons and violence are no way to solve problems.

But I was talking about this once with one of my old friends from South Carolina, where, consistent with the stereotype, guns are plentiful as are the people who love them. And he pointed out to me something I hadn't really thought about before: the fact that at least one of the disciples was carrying a sword.

I was stunned for a moment. I'd always focused on Jesus' words so much that I missed the reason he spoke them. Peter was packin' heat! Was it normal for the disciples to carry swords? Did they all carry weapons? Did Jesus?

Jesus' words are pretty clear: “All who take the sword will die by the sword.” But the beginning of that sentence is interesting too. Jesus tells the disciple to “Put your sword *back into its place*.” Jesus doesn't appear to be surprised that one of his closest friends is carrying a weapon. And rather than tell him to get rid of it, he tells him to put it back in its place. Does that suggest the sword might actually have a proper place there?

Are we to believe that the men of Jesus' day carried swords as a matter of course? Apparently, some of them did. We know from the parable of the Good Samaritan that travel could be dangerous, and these disciples of Jesus were itinerant; they travelled a lot. Maybe it's possible that Peter didn't normally carry a sword, but he did this night because he suspected Jesus would be in danger. Or maybe this was just the first century version of the pocketknife; a multi-use tool that men who lived off of the land, like the disciples, would have used as a tool for cleaning fish and hunting and fending off wild animals that drew too close to their campfires at night.

I can't really say. I am no expert on first century tools and weaponry. But there is no denying that in this story, one of Jesus' group has a sword which may or may not be a concern to Jesus.

What does concern him is what might happen to those he loves if they turn to the sword as a way of life. Yes, the fact that one of the disciples was apparently carrying is an interesting rhetorical point. But Jesus is clear that violence is not the way of the Christian. Violence you see, breeds more violence. Jesus understood that.

Jesus advised turning the other cheek and finding non-violent ways to resist oppressors.⁷ He taught that he came that we might have life (not death and destruction) and have it abundantly, and that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.⁸ The vision of the Kingdom from Isaiah that we read earlier describes a world in which the people “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” It is not a stretch to say that God desires a world without violence; a world free from conflict.

And yet, here’s this friend of mine, an educated man; a Christian, telling me that in this story, Jesus tolerates the presence of a weapon and would therefore be okay with *him* owning a Glock for protection. And that may be. But I know; like I know the sun will come up tomorrow, like I know that grass is green, and sky is blue, that Jesus does not want the death and violence and bloodshed and fear that we have now.

And so, we live in a society where suggesting that maybe we limit gun ownership to certain types of guns or prohibit them to certain people gets met with resistance. And we make our arguments and our counterarguments, and we go round and round, and while we debate and discuss and parse the words of Jesus and of the second amendment, the carnage continues.

I’ve heard all the arguments for and against. In the same way that my sermon from 12 years ago sounds like it could have been written yesterday, the same arguments from 12 years ago are still going back and forth today.

- Some argue a good guy with a gun can stop a bad guy with a gun. But then someone else counters that statistically this almost never happens and when it does, the good guy is almost always highly trained. Not to mention the fact that good guys and bad guys look identical. The only difference is which way they are shooting.

And while that argument goes on, 50 people are murdered and 53 more are wounded in an Orlando nightclub by a man with a gun.⁹

- Then a gun control advocate argues that making guns harder to get would slow down the rate of gun violence. But someone else counters that this would also make it harder for law abiding citizens to get guns.

And while they debate, 27 people die and 20 more are wounded in a mass shooting at a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, by a man with a gun.¹⁰

- Some folks argue that having guns around them, being able to carry in public, concealed carry; these things make them feel more safe. Other folks argue that more guns in public make them feel less safe.

And while they argue, 59 people die, and 422 others are wounded on the Las Vegas Strip by a man firing assault weapons from a high-rise hotel window.¹¹

- Some argue that common sense regulation benefits everybody, including law-abiding gun owners. But then others contend any regulation is the first step on a slippery slope to outlawing guns altogether.

And while they argue, 20 children die at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut,¹² 12 people die in an Aurora Colorado movie theater,¹³ 14 students die at a Parkland, Florida high school,¹⁴ 9 people die in a Charleston, South Carolina church.¹⁵ All murdered by men with guns.

According to analysis conducted in 2016 by well-known fact-check website Snopes.com,¹⁶ since 1968, more Americans have died by gun violence in this country than have died in every war the United States has ever fought.¹⁷ Think about that for a minute: More Americans have died by gun violence in this country *just in the past half-century*, than have been killed in all the wars the United States has ever fought. I don’t know the answer, but I know Jesus doesn’t want that. If you take the sword you will perish by the sword. And yet all we do is argue and very little changes.

Maybe part of the problem is our inability and unwillingness to listen to one another, to compromise, to acknowledge that even people with whom we disagree can have rational reasoning for why they believe what they believe. We have to bridge that divide to hear one another’s concerns and understand one another’s positions. We can’t just shout at one another. We can’t just attack one another. No one wins in that scenario. Everyone keeps arguing because everyone hates losing. When you make it a win-lose proposition, you guarantee that nobody wins, and everybody loses.

So, we have to speak up. But we also need to listen. We have to educate ourselves and we have to understand the viewpoints of others. We have to be brave, and we have to trust in God to guide us. And we can’t be afraid to sit down with people with whom we disagree, and have rational conversations that honor our opinions, but that work toward solutions. And we have to vote. In this country, we have been blessed with the gift of a voice in how our community is governed. We have to use it.

So, what is the proper way to address all of this gun violence in our country? I don't know. But I do know that can't be the end of the discussion. Because we have to do something.

We can argue the law and the intention of the framers of the constitution and the needs of people to feel safe and the statistics recording deaths and carnage and bloodshed, and debate what they all mean. But we always come back to Jesus. That's what we Christians do. We're bull-headed and stubborn that way. We always come back to Jesus, and when we do, we find him about to be arrested by those who have arranged for an unjust show trial and a Roman crucifixion. If there was ever a time when violence in the name of self-defense or the defense of a loved one was justified this would seem to be it.

But when one of those disciples Jesus loved, and who loved him too, took hold of his weapon to save the life of his friend, his master, the Messiah, and to do so violently, Jesus said "Stop. Put it away."

So, as Christians we have to start from where Jesus does. By putting our swords in their proper place. By putting our trust and faith in God to show us the right way. By choosing life rather than the violence and bloodshed and death that come from relying on the tools of violence.

And by listening to each other; being open to one another's truth; by being open to compromise.

I pray we can find an answer.

I pray we can come together as a nation to stop gun violence.

I pray God can work on the hearts of those who resist change so that our laws can protect the innocent from those who would seek to use guns to cause more bloodshed.

I pray the Church will have the courage to stand up and let the voice of Jesus be heard.

And I pray I can put this sermon in a file, and never have to pull it out again.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Matthew 16:21-23, NRSV

² Mark 14:47, NRSV

³ Matthew 26:51, NRSV

⁴ Luke 22:49, NRSV

⁵ John 18:10, NRSV

⁶ Luke 22:51, Matthew 26:52, John 18:11, NRSV

⁷ Matthew 5:38-40, NRSV

⁸ John 10:10, NRSV

⁹ "Orlando nightclub shooting - Wikipedia." 8 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orlando_nightclub_shooting.

¹⁰ "Sutherland Springs church shooting - Wikipedia." 9 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutherland_Springs_church_shooting.

¹¹ "2017 Las Vegas shooting - Wikipedia." 8 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Las_Vegas_shooting.

¹² Barron, James. "Gunman Kills 20 Schoolchildren in Connecticut." N. Y. Times, 14 Dec. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/nyregion/shooting-reported-at-connecticut-elementary-school.html.

¹³ Frosch, Dan and Kirk Johnson. "12 Are Killed at Showing of Batman Movie in Colorado." N. Y. Times, 20 July 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/07/21/us/shooting-at-colorado-theater-showing-batman-movie.html.

¹⁴ "The Names and Faces of the Florida School Shooting Victims." 13 Aug. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/us/florida-school-victims.html.

¹⁵ "Nine Killed in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston." N. Y. Times, 13 Aug. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/us/church-attacked-in-charleston-south-carolina.html.

¹⁶ "FACT CHECK: Do U.S. Gun Deaths Since 1968 Outnumber Deaths in All American Wars?" Snopes.com, 9 Aug. 2019, www.snopes.com/fact-check/gun-deaths-wars.

¹⁷ "Americans" refers to the total number of gun deaths in the U.S. regardless of nationality. Similarly, American war deaths include non-native and immigrant soldiers (which were especially common during the Civil War, for instance). Many war casualty totals are based on estimates. For purposes of their work, Snopes used the highest estimates available. Even using the higher end of available estimates for war deaths throughout American history, the grand total of those deaths is still lower than the total of firearms-related fatalities since 1968, a period of just 49 years (as of 2016 when this article was written). The imprecision of casualty estimates (especially for the Civil War era) allows for a considerable margin of error.