

**The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown
Sermon Preached
on
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by
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Blessed Are The Peacemakers

Psalm 121
Matthew 5:1-12

I do not have my usual opening story to put a smile on your face this morning, instead I have some sobering facts to share with you. It is really a litany of true tales of violence. The litany begins less than twenty years ago on “October 17, 1991 when a 35 year old man barreled his pick up truck through the window of a Luby’s fast food restaurant in Killeen, Texas. He opened fire on a crowd of people who were eating lunch there and when it was over he had shot and killed 23 people and wounded 20 others.

“A year and a half later, a 55 year old business man in San Francisco walked into an office building around 3:00 in the afternoon, took the elevator up to the 34th floor and shot and killed 8 people working at a law office before turning the gun on himself.

“Four and a half years after that, two young boys armed with guns, an 11 year old and a 13 year old, shot and killed four girls and a teacher and wounded ten others at their middle school in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

“The spring after that, in Littleton, CO, two students at Columbine High School, shot and killed 12 of their classmates, one of their teachers and wounded 26 others before killing themselves in the school’s library.

“Three months later a 44 year old Georgian day-trader went to the offices of two separate day trading firms in Atlanta, armed with two guns, he opened fire inside. Nine people were shot and killed before the gunman later shot himself.

“A few years later in March 2005 a 44 year old man walked into a church service in Brookfield, Wisconsin brandishing a 9mm hand gun. The man shot and killed the minister and six other people before killing himself.

“Just 9 days after that a sixteen year old boy in nearby Red Lake, Minnesota shot and killed his grandfather and his grandfather’s girlfriend. Then he walked to the local high school where he shot and killed five students and a teacher and a security guard. Nine people in all.

“Ten months after that a former US postal worker in California walks into the mail processing plant that she used to work at. Armed only with a pistol she shot and killed seven employees and then turned the gun on herself.

“Nine months after that a 32 year old man shot and killed five school age girls at an Amish school in rural Pennsylvania. Then he killed himself.

“Four months later an 18 year old in Salt Lake City, Utah, walks into a local mall, opens fire, killing five and wounding four others before he was shot and killed by police.

“Nine weeks after that it was a normal start to a weekday at Virginia Tech when a 23 year old, mentally disturbed Virginia Tech student roamed the campus killing 32 people and then himself. The single deadliest mass shooting in US history.

“Eight months after that a 19 year old walks into a shopping mall in Omaha, Nebraska. He shoots and kills eight people and wounds four others in a span of six minutes before killing himself.

“Two months after that, another US college campus, Northern Illinois University, a former student walks into a lecture hall there, opens fire. Five students shot and killed, eighteen others wounded.

“A year later, the scene was in immigrant community center in upstate New York, a 41 year old man shoots and kills 11 people attending the center, plus two of the center’s employees, before then killing himself.

“Seven months after that an army psychiatrist walks onto an army base at Fort Hood, Texas. Thirteen people shot and killed, thirty others wounded.

“And then last weekend in Tucson, Arizona, a 22 year old man shot and killed six people, including a federal judge, and wounded fourteen others including a congress woman who was apparently the target of his attack.”¹

Wow! And this is only a partial list of mass shootings that have taken place in the last twenty years. I don’t know about you but hearing these accounts leaves me numb. It leaves me sad. It leaves me angry. It leaves me shaking my head and asking, “Why?”

An average of 85 people are killed by guns every day in the United States. That means that since last Saturday’s killings in Tucson approximately 595 people have been killed as a result of gun violence! That is incredible and it is inexcusable!

In addition to the persons killed daily, approximately another 190 are injured by guns. So if we do the math it means that in our country about 30,000 people are

¹The Rachel Maddow Show, January 10, 2011

killed each year by guns and another 70,000 will survive from their gun shot wounds but most with their lives and the lives of their families totally changed. And of these numbers children and youth are far too many of the victims. It is estimated that 3,000 children are killed each year from gun violence, which comes out to about 9 children a day . . . 9 children each day die from guns! And one in about every three of them shot the gun themselves, either accidentally or intentionally.

Again, there are about 30,000 people killed each year in our country from gun violence. Let me tell you that is far and away more people killed by guns in one year than in any other industrialized country. For example, in England, where less than 5% of households have guns, in 2006, there were 159 deaths caused by guns. What did we have? 30,000 on average! Japan is a country that prohibits handguns and has strict regulations on long guns. In 2006 they had 96 people die as a result of gun violence. And we had 30,000? What is this about? Do you know that there were more Americans killed by gun violence than by war in the 20th century?

Sad to say but our country seems to have a fascination with violence and particularly gun violence! Watch television . . . go to the movies . . . check out the video games our youth and even adults are playing . . . visit Toys-R-Us to see what is being sold to our children. As a nation we accept and tolerate the violence and killing that is so prevalent in our culture's media. Even sadder is that we seem to buy into the idea that if we own a gun . . . if we carry a gun . . . we will be safer.

John Lott, Jr., a research scientist at the University of Maryland wrote what has become a popular book among those opposing strict gun regulations. The book is called More Guns, Less Crime and the premise is, as the title suggests, that the more people who arm themselves, the less criminal activity there will be. Mr. Lott and his supporters clearly do not follow Jesus' teaching when he told Peter who was grabbing his sword in defense: "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

These words of our Lord have been proven to be true by several studies, one out of the University of Pennsylvania which found that those in possession of guns were 4 ½ times more likely to be shot than those without guns. Similarly David Hemenway, a professor at Harvard University, found that having a gun in the home makes you much more likely to be shot, either by accident, by suicide or by homicide.

You have probably heard the line used by many, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." So does that make guns okay? How about this for a reply, "Of course guns don't kill people, people *with guns* kill people."

This is not an epidemic that is only an urban problem. People are also being killed by guns in our suburbs and in the rural areas of our country. That was evident in the litany of accounts I shared with you earlier. No community is immune. Not one of us here this morning is immune to the possibility of being killed or wounded by a

gun. As long as we live in this country, we are all at risk of being a victim of gun violence.

Instead of asking the question of “Why?” after each one of these tragedies occurs, we need to be asking, “What can I do?” And we CAN do something . . . and we MUST do something. It is time for us to come together and say, “No more!”

It is time for us, as people of faith, to listen to the words of our Lord when he said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus preached non-violence. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” In other words, do not respond in kind when someone takes an action against you. Similar words are offered to you in our benediction each week . . . words that are found in Romans, First Thessalonians and First Peter: “Return no one evil for evil.” As people of faith we need to live by these words and understand that the proliferation of guns in our society prevents these teachings from being lived out.

It is time for us, as people of faith, to take action. For the same twenty year span that those gun massacres of my beginning litany took place, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been making official statements and releasing reports against gun violence but the violence has continued. We need to stop talking and start acting . . . acting on our faith . . .and acting with faith. We CAN make a serious dent in the number of deaths caused by guns . . . and we must begin now!

Heeding God’s Call is a local faith based organization focused on preventing gun violence. Over a year ago our Session voted to adopt a Covenant of Commitment developed by this group. In so doing we agreed to join “with other communities of faith to raise awareness of gun violence as a spiritual and moral crisis.” And we said we would “work toward a peaceable society where all children have the opportunity to grow and prosper, and where everyone can live without fear of being cut down by firearm violence.” This Covenant of Commitment ends by stating, “As people of faith, we embrace Dr. Martin Luther King’s hope for peace and safety in our communities. We resist apathy to this epidemic of violence, because fear, closed doors, and separation will not end it. We unite to bring God’s vision of a peaceable kingdom.”

As people of faith . . . as members and friends of The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown . . . we have a very tangible and powerful opportunity to live out this commitment as we are among the founding congregations of a one of several groups that *Heeding God’s Call* is forming throughout our city. One of the things these chapters are being asked is to identify and adopt a gun shop that is known for allowing straw purchases. STRAW PURCHASES??? A straw purchase happens frequently in Pennsylvania gun stores as persons with no criminal records, legally buy a large number of guns at one time (it can be as many as three dozen or more guns at

one time) . . . usually handguns. They then sell them to an underground market dealer for a profit. This underground market dealer illegally sells the guns to people who are unable to buy them legally and the guns are then often used in crimes. These straw purchases must be stopped. They are not legal in New Jersey or New York, so guess where people from these states come? . . . to Pennsylvania where it is legal. As people of faith we must say “No more!” And through these area chapters of *Heeding God’s Call* groups are being organized to do just that!

There is an African Proverb that tells us: “If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.” That is what we are doing as we join together with faith communities seeking to Heed God’s Call in being people who work toward peace and non-violence . . . Heeding God’s Call as people who seek to follow the commandment of “Thou shall not kill” . . . Heeding God’s Call as people who pay attention to the words of the prophets calling us to beat swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks . . . Heeding God’s Call as people who know that the greatest commandment is to Love God, and the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We need to join together with other people of faith and strive to Heed God’s Call and address the atrocity of gun violence.

This church . . . you and I . . . WE are now part of the Neighborhood Partners to End Gun Violence, and a gun shop has been identified, of which we are asking the owner to adopt a “Code of Conduct” which will lead to eliminating the ability of persons to make straw purchases. This is not about prohibiting persons from legally purchasing guns for sporting purposes, but about controlling who can purchase guns, how they are purchased and deterring the illegal sales of guns.

A letter was sent to the gun shop along with the ten point Code of Conduct. The owner is asked to sign the code within the next couple of months. If it is not signed our group, hopefully with you included, will take action in the way of peaceful protests outside of the shop. Sound radical? As people of faith our radical Lord and Savior called us to be radical and outspoken as well.

There is that wonderful quote that you can even read on bumper stickers: “If you want peace, then work for justice.” The key word here is “work!” It is not enough that we pray for the victims of gun violence. It is not even enough that our prayers include the perpetrators of these crimes. We must do more. In the first letter of John we read, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose life we honor this weekend, once said, “if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of humankind and fire the souls of the people.” No longer can the church . . . can people of faith . . . all faiths . . . just sit by and watch what is happening. “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” . . . “If you want peace, then work for justice.” . . . You see,

we must be radical as we are called to stand up and take action. And that is precisely what our participation with Neighborhood Partners to End Gun Violence is all about.

In preparation for our action an event is being held right here at The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, as people from all of the member congregations of the Neighborhood Partners to End Gun Violence will gather on Sunday afternoon, February 13. I can't stress enough the importance for each one of us to be here for that event which is called, "In Their Names: A Remembrance and Call to Action."

In fact, I encourage you be a part of the planning group of Neighborhood Partners to End Gun Violence as they meet 7:00 tomorrow evening at The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. I'm going to be there! Irene Overton is going to be there! Will you join us?

We all need to be part of this effort to reduce gun violence in our northwest community and in our city. We can't be complacent . . . we can't be apathetic . . . we can't be silent any longer. We must act!

We heard Dick Liberty read for us earlier what we know as the Beatitudes. And it is there where our Lord said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Jesus recognized that to be a peacemaker is not easy. Peacemakers must have courage and determination. Jesus knew that as we try to be peacemakers we will be ridiculed and criticized so he said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"Blessed are the peacemakers . . ." May we all . . . each and everyone of us . . . have the courage and determination to be peacemakers as together we work to reduce gun violence.

Thanks be to God. Amen.