

THE GOSPEL AND GUN VIOLENCE

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Grace Church in New York
Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent
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*Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long. (Psalm 25:4)*

...Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:14-15)

Wednesday was always going to be a strange day, with the confluence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. The day we are reminded of our mortality and called to repentance with ashes and solemn prayers, and the day we celebrate love, especially romantic love, with chocolates, red roses, and candlelit dinners. Despite the proximity of Valentine's Day to the Lenten season, this particular conjunction had not occurred in over 70 years. So, yes, it was always going to be a strange day, but it turned out to be a tragic day. I wonder if any of us will ever remember Ash Wednesday or Valentine's Day without thinking of 2018 and the shooting in Parkland, Florida? Or will it become just one in a long string of mass shootings? I've been ordained a relatively short time--it will be 7 years in June--but in that time, I've stepped into the pulpit after mass shootings at least once a year, and sometimes more than once. It's becoming far too familiar. But I refuse to let it become so normal that I don't address it here.

The shooting in Florida this week was terrible, and the timing made it even more troubling. Images circulated of survivors, responders, and family members with ash on their foreheads. The reminder of mortality smudged on the faces of those who had come face to face with death. A symbol of repentance reminding all us that a great sin had been committed, and that the evil of gun violence continues to plague the world, and especially the United States. And yet we see no repentance in the face of this violence.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the church season in which we join Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. It was a journey that ended in his death, but death that gave way to new life. In Lent, we are invited to begin the process of building a new life. It starts on Ash Wednesday when the priest invites the congregation to the observance of a holy Lent. She or he says the following

Dear People of God: The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.

The congregation then kneels in silence for a time before the priest prays over the ashes that they be signs of mortality and penitence which remind us that life is a gracious gift of God. The ashes are then imposed with the sign of the cross and the familiar words, “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

This Lent, I believe that we as a human family, and particularly we as Americans, are called to kneel down and examine the violence that we seem unable to escape. With ash on all our faces, we are challenged to turn back from our sins and make a right beginning. With the psalmist, we cry:

*Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.*

God sometimes teaches us through our fellow human beings, and sometimes through those whom we as adults think we’re teaching: our children and youth. Among those leading the call for examination of and repentance from the epidemic of gun violence are the young people who have grown up in a world where school shootings are routine enough to warrant regular lockdown drills. I would like to share with you a passage from an article in this week’s New York Times:¹

This is life for the children of the mass shooting generation. They were born into a world reshaped by the 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Colorado, and grew up practicing active shooter drills and huddling through lockdowns. They talked about threats and safety steps with their parents and teachers. With friends, they wondered darkly whether it could happen at their own school, and who might do it.

Now, this generation is almost grown up. And when a gunman killed 17 people this week at Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla., the first response of many of their classmates was not to grieve in silence, but to speak out. Their urgent voices — in television interviews, on social media, even from inside a locked school office as they hid from the gunman — are now rising in the national debate over gun violence in the aftermath of yet another school shooting.

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In today’s gospel, we have a three-part story of trust in God’s salvation. First, Jesus is baptized, a sign of God’s covenant with us. Then he was immediately driven out into the wilderness to be tempted. He had to trust himself, in his mission, and in the Spirit that drove him there. Then he returned to Galilee and began proclaiming the good news of God. “Repent and believe in the

good news.” He trusted that his message would be heard and that he would have the courage and endurance to keep sharing it.

Repent and believe in the good news. “Believe” here is translated from a Greek word that would more accurately be rendered as “trust.” It’s the kind of trust that one biblical scholar described as coming more from your gut than your head. But how do we trust? How do we get that feeling in our gut that triumphs over the fears that we hear in our head and feel in our body? One way is through spiritual practices that help us become more aware of God’s presence all around us. The observance of a holy Lent is one such practice that contains within itself a cluster of practices.

Despite its popular image as a time of strict self-denial from indulgences like alcohol, sugar, and chocolate, Lent isn’t really meant to make us feel guilty about such things or that we’re worthless sinners when it comes to larger matters. It’s about getting down to what really matters in life. Traditionally, Lent was observed by some form of fasting, by giving alms to the poor, by praying more and reading or hearing the Bible more. The point of an increased spiritual discipline is not to punish ourselves but to help us break free of certain patterns that are not helpful, and to introduce new patterns that improve our relationships with others and with God.

Lent is an opportunity to re-focus so that we can repent. Repentance, from the Greek *metanoia*, means to change our minds. As we turn ourselves, in heart, mind, and body, toward God, we might feel within ourselves a stronger sense that we are on the right path. Perhaps we will have that feeling of trust in our gut. Fortified by the confidence that God is with us, we can begin to seek changes around us, including the seemingly hopeless case of gun violence.

“Repent and believe in the good news.” Repent and trust the good news.

The good news this week is that we *can* do something.

After the shooting this week, a group of Episcopal bishops issued a statement saying:ⁱⁱ

In the wake of this massacre, we believe God is calling us to understand that we must not simply identify the social and political impediments to ending these lethal spasms of violence in our country. We must reflect on and acknowledge our own complicity in the unjust systems that facilitate so many deaths, and, in accordance with the keeping of a holy Lent, repent and make reparations.

They cited the death of Carmen Schentrup, a 16 year old Episcopalian killed in the Parkland Shooting and remembered Ben Wheeler, a young member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown, CT, who was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. His father David issued a challenge to all parents--to look at their children and ask, “Am I doing everything I can to keep them safe? Because the answer to that question, if we all answer honestly, clearly is no.” The bishops wrote: “In memory of Carmen and Ben and all of God’s children lost to senseless gun violence, may God give us grace and fortitude in our witness so that we can, at last, answer yes.” Yes, we are doing everything we can.

“Repent and believe in the good news.” Repent and trust.

Our human family, and particularly the branch found here in the United States, needs to change its mind, to repent, from the epidemic of gun violence. One way we can do this is to seek changes in policy. As the bishops write,

We understand that mass shootings account for a small percentage of the victims of gun violence; that far more people are killed by handguns than by any kind of rifle; that poverty, misogyny and racism contribute mightily to the violence in our society and that soaring rates of suicide remain a great unaddressed social challenge. And yet, the problem of gun violence is complex, and we must sometimes address it in small pieces if it is not to overwhelm us.

The bishops have called on us to advocate for changes in policy in three specific areas: bans against assault rifles, high capacity magazines, and bump stocks which allow semiautomatic rifles to act as machine guns. In identifying particular policy goals, the bishops are on to something. When we set our sights on specific, achievable goals, a big problem seems a little less overwhelming. As goals, even small ones are met, it builds momentum for addressing a larger crisis.

Repent, and believe in the good news. Repent and trust the good news.

Beyond policy changes, we are invited to transformation. This is the heart of the good news that Jesus proclaimed. God created us in the image of God, as sons and daughters. We are children of God. And so we are called to transform ourselves and our world into the image of God that we were created to be. We can have the confidence to begin this work because we know that God loves us, that God suffers with us, and that God is working through human history to transform us. We are partners in this work when we answer God's call--the call to get out of the wilderness and get back to the work of mission. The world needs healing, and it begins with each act of kindness that we perform.

Believe in the good news. Trust the good news.

All violence, including gun violence, will end when the world is fully transformed into the image of God, a world in which we all love one another as fellow children of God. It may sound utopian, and we're far from it right now, but I truly believe this will happen one day. But until then, we need to continue to repent and to actively work against the proliferation of guns and glorification of violence, and we need to work for greater mental health services and more inclusion of isolated, hurting people in the life of our communities. There isn't one easy solution. But that doesn't mean we can't take steps in the right direction as we build a movement that will bring about real change.

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for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.*

Repent, and believe in the good news. Repent and trust in God's good news.

ⁱ "Mass shooting generation cries out for change:" <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/us/columbine-mass-shootings.html?action=click&contentCollection=U.S.&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article>

ⁱⁱ Bishops against Gun Violence: <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/bishops-against-gun-violence-responds-to-florida-shooting/>