

Spirit of Peace

A Sermon on Galatians 5: 1, 13-25
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
Sunday June 26, 2016

Two weeks ago we woke up on a Sunday morning to the news¹ that overnight a man entered the Pulse nightclub, a sanctuary in the gay community, in Orlando, Florida and killed 49 people, and injured another 53, many of them severely. It was a shocking event, horrifying to imagine as the information about it came to light, especially as it was not just a mass shooting, but an attack on the gay community, the immigrant community, and also the Latino/a community--it was Latin night at Pulse that fateful night.

While large scale events like the Pulse shooting are beyond description in the scale of their horror, the truth of the matter is that on average, 89 people die each day in our country from gun violence. That is 623 people/week, and on average, 49 of them are children each week, the same number from the Pulse shooting.

Every week on average, 49 children die in our country from gun violence.

Every week nearly half of these shooting are homicides and another nearly half are suicides, with a few deaths that are unintentional.

Unintentional shootings are 3x higher for children than for adults.

And there are another nearly 1,450 people shot each week in our country who survive. This adds up to a staggering number of just over 32,000 people each year in our country who die from gun violence, nearly 2,700 of them are children, with an additional nearly 76,000 people who are shot and survive their injuries, but probably not the emotional and psychological trauma they experience.

The statistics I just shared with you come from the Brady Campaign to end gun violence, founded by Jim and Sarah Brady. Jim Brady was President Ronald Reagan's press secretary who was shot on the attempt on President Reagan's life on March 30, 1981. Jim suffered an injury that day that has left him paralyzed for life and out of this deep personal tragedy he and his wife became lifelong advocates to end gun violence

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Orlando_nightclub_shooting

in all its forms around our country. Jim died just a few years ago, his wife continues with the work.

I begin your summer sermon series with these statistics² and information because gun violence right now is fresh on our minds because of the Pulse Shooting. But there is an equivalent of a Pulse shooting every week in our country, and that exact number, on average, of children between the ages of 0-19 die each week in our country from gun violence.

49 of them.

49 children aged 0-19 die each week in our country at the hands of a firearm.

You know, I know, that every person who dies is someone else's beloved.

Every person who dies is someone else's, hope.

Every person who dies is someone else's, dream.

Every person who dies is someone else's strength.

Every person who dies is someone else's heart.

The American Medical Association calls gun violence a "public health crisis"³ in our country.

Sisters and brothers--fellow people of faith--we have a lot of spiritual work to do when it comes to atoning for gun violence in our midst.

We have a lot of spiritual work to do when we imagine the level of harm and pain that is being caused day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute throughout our country, in our communities.

If we take our faith seriously, then it means that we are called to be bringers and bearers of the light of Jesus Christ which means that when we are in the midst of a crisis of this proportion, we should be doing something, we should be saying some, we should be resisting something.

Our Scripture reading for this morning comes to us out of Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia. It was written around 50 BCE, or about 20 years after the death of Jesus,

² <http://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics>

³ <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/news/news/2016/2016-06-14-gun-violence-lobby-congress.page>

making it one of the earliest Epistles, or letters, from Paul that was written. While not all of the letters in the Bible can be easily traced to Paul, or authenticated, this one can be. These are Paul's words, written to those who were new to the early and itself new and forming church. These were his words about how to be community, how to live into the message of Jesus Christ, how to live out their faith. In it he writes these words from our selection this morning:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When we imagine the call of Christ, as written to the early church and written to the church today through the words of Paul, it is clear that we are called to be servants of one another, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul here is quoting Jesus who answered in the Gospels the questions of the religious leaders of his day, when they attempted to trick Jesus by asking what the Greatest Commandment (and hoping to trip Jesus up and show him to be less of a religious leader than they were) Jesus says: "to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself".

And when Jesus is asked the follow-up question, that was meant to also be sneaky: "And then, who is my neighbor?", his answer is in the form of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel, the tenth chapter:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, [k] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Who is our neighbor today? What does it mean to be a neighbor today?

Imagine with me if you would a few scenarios of Christ-like neighborliness in all its radical forms when we take into account Paul's words about love, care and peace as found in this morning's text from Galatians:

We cannot just patch up the wounds of our society as easily as the Samaritan did on the Jericho road. I desperately wish, as I am sure many of you do, that it would be as simple as that. When we contemplate the horrors of gun violence, much of the pain, much of the hurt cannot be fixed that easily.

But what if we imagined our society in the place of the man who fell into the hands of robbers? Hasn't our society fallen into the hands of robbers, been stripped down by greed at the hands of a small few who are interested only in their own self-gain, who have now walked away, leaving our society half dead? In this midst of this Jericho-road experience for our society, we have the heart-wrenching and community-destroying experience of gun violence that robs away life and wholeness all around us. What would it mean in this context, our context, to bandage the wounds of our society?

What would it mean in this context, for us, the church, to be the Samaritan as our society walks the Jericho road? What in this context would it be to love our neighbor as ourselves and to not behave as the priest did on that Jericho road, walking on the other side, not looking at the mess and horror on the other side of the road. And let me say, that response of the priest on the Jericho-road, if we are honest, isn't that how we usually respond when pain, dislocation, and horror is more than we can handle?

What would it be like to really look at what is before us as an act of faith and then do something with it as an act of faith-filled redemptive, healing love?

It could mean getting out of our comfort zones and joining a peace vigil whenever there is an act of gun violence.

It could mean rolling up our sleeves and committing ourselves to the eradication of weapons of violence in not just our communities, but in the communities that we would perhaps never dare step a foot in.

It could mean coming alongside communities that are not our own to listen and to learn about their context--and seeing how we can best use our own power and privilege in the service of others.

It could mean using our voices, speaking out every time there is an act of gun violence to denounce it, to denounce violence in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. To be clear about who we are as people who follow Jesus and our role as peacemakers in a broken world.

It could mean political activity, using our resources to assist in the political process of a peace-filled society, and holding those who continue the permissive structure of the laws of our country that enable increasing levels of gun violence accountable.

The reason Paul's call in Galatians is so strong towards neighborliness and so radically challenging towards being a peacemaker in Galatians is because he is re-remembering for the community of Galatia what Jesus says when Jesus says "neighbor."

For Jesus the neighbor is not your next door neighbor, who you know, who is safe, whose lifestyle is probably very similar to yours.

For Jesus the neighbor is the one you do not want to meet, the one who is from a very different socio-economic background than yours. The neighbor is the one who is naked and bleeding in the road, unsightly, unseemly--the one who you do not know what to say to.

The call to live into a life of Christ is not easy--but the call is there, and it is our choice whether or not we want to take it up. Those most needing us on today's Jericho roads might not be those we envision encountering and meeting--but they are the people that Jesus Christ, our Savior challenges us to go to. And walking the other way from them is in fact, walking away from Christ in our midst.

49 children on average every week die at the hands of a gun in our country.

623 people on average every week die at the hand of a gun in our country.

I can see no other Jericho road right now for us to walk along.

No other Jericho road for us right now to be healers upon.

No other Jericho road to test our faith and call us to discipleship.

The words of Paul to the Church in Galatia might as well have been written for us today in the United States in 2016:

*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.
And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.*

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Spirit of Peace.

Spirit of Jesus.

Spirit of Peace.

Amen.