

Peace in a World of Violence
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 28, 2013
Linda Knieriemen, guest preacher

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5
Galatians 5:13-15
John 18:33-38

A Princeton preaching professor gave me this advice: “Don’t preach a text if you aren’t passionate about it.”

A Sr. Pastor with whom I worked in my first parish gave me this advice: “As soon as you stop being nervous about getting into the pulpit, stop preaching.”

This morning I am both passionate about my texts and still, after 23 years, nervous about preaching, especially here. I know this as a congregation who has and expects excellence in preaching. And I know that both Gordon and Jill were taught to preach at Princeton Theological Seminary as was I. And I’ve chosen a challenging topic. I hope this will yield a sermon containing somewhere within the Word of God, for the people of God.

Let us pray:

Remember Mamma Cass?

“There’s a new world coming, and it’s just around the bend:

There’s a new world coming; this one’s coming to an end.

Yes a new world’s coming, the one we’ve had visions of,

Coming in peace, coming in joy, coming in love.”

(Now you TOO can have that song running around in your head all day!)

Mama Cass sang that a “new world is coming” with conviction as a 1960’s Peace Advocate, but Isaiah, prophet of Israel, sang it first to a 7th Century BC to people suffering under war and destruction. We are as resistant to the ways of peace as we’ve ever been, so we still need to hear that peace, not violence, is God’s

intention. There are hints of that new world but blurred still by the smoke of bombs and the noisy popping of gunfire. One more murder in Grand Rapids last night.

The days are surely coming... They haven't come yet, have they? Ours is a culture accustomed to violence, some would say numb to it:

Publicized drone attacks, IED's and mass shootings, and armed neighborhood watchers are the media's favorites yet they are the tip of the iceberg.

+The Children's Defense Fund reports that one child or teen dies or is injured by guns every 30 minutes.

+The US has the highest rate of per capita shooting deaths of any developed country including Austria, France, Germany, Canada, and the UK (Cukier and Sidel (2006), *The Global Gun Epidemic*. Praeger Security International. Westport.)

+In 2010 guns took the lives of 31,000 Americans in homicides, suicides and unintentional shootings. (CDC Statistics)

Those numbers compel me to address the oh-so- controversial topic of gun violence. I've preached a version of this sermon for the Presbyterian saints down the street, so I assure you that I'm not just using this invitation, and this venue, as some bully pulpit from which to discharge my personal opinions and run away.

It isn't an anti-hunting sermon: If you bring me venison I'll bless your rifle.

This isn't anti-Second Amendment sermon: courts have ruled on that.

This isn't a sermon to replace another one about the need for improved treatment for those with serious mental illness.

This IS a reflection about the national problem of gun violence, and an attempt to explore it through the eyes of scripture (not scripture through the eyes of societal fear). Christians can't leave the topic to polarizing populist pundits, whether hawks or doves or crows.

I offer this morning two possible Biblical frameworks through which to consider a Christian response to gun violence. There are others... "Do Not Kill", for example, but we'll be nuanced: Ethics of the Reign of God and Ethics of Freedom in Christian Community.

ETHICS of the Reign of God

First, to Isaiah. In the days to come...peace. Do you believe those days are still to come, or do we declare this a failed prophecy? Do we consider even *Jesus' announcement* of the Reign of God a proved impossible utopian dream designed to pacify societal despair? After 9000-10,000 years of continuing warfare and violence, that would be a reasonable conclusion, but not a faithful or Biblical one. It is a gift to have been given this vision, this hope, that there is a different way to create a world! God has something else in mind. "*In the days to come,*" Isaiah might say to us today, "guns designed to kill human beings will be no longer relevant. *In the days to come,* machines designed to create automatic weapons will be retooled to make John Deere tractors". *In the days to come,* "there will be no reason for a civilian to go to target practice with a handgun." Jesus, of course, proclaiming that this Reign of God had begun, renewed this vision and demonstrated through teaching, and in dying, the ways of nonviolence:

"Blessed are the Peacemakers".

"Put your sword away, Peter, those who live by the sword will die by the sword".

"My realm is not of this world" he says to Pilate, "If it were, my followers would be following the world's ways and fight for my life".

We pray for it, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done", which I take to mean that if we really long for God's Reign, we will act as if it is already here. Isn't our mission to create the container, prepare the way, into which that new world will come?

So, if we claim to follow Jesus, Prince of Peace, in whose Realm instruments designed to kill other humans are turned into instruments to feed the world, what does that say about the easy civilian access to semi-automatic assault weapons? Or... under what circumstances does one who prays regularly for the Reign of God to be fulfilled on earth as in heaven keep a loaded handgun in his or her dresser drawer? Aren't there other even more effective, less lethal, ways to protect a family from a potential intruder? Have locks, security systems, a barking dog, a tape recording of a barking dog, a canister of mace or pepper spray, and 9-1-1 all proved ineffective? Maybe they have. Maybe we are left with admitting we can't live as God would have us live because the days that are surely coming surely haven't come.

These are disturbing questions. You may not like that I raise them, but all of us must struggle with them, pray about them, and find answers for ourselves.

A movie illustration about recognizing the Reign of God:

In the 1985 film, "Witness", an Amish boy named Samuel happens to see act of corrupt violence in a Philadelphia train station. As the movie unfolds, he has an opportunity to steal a handgun from a wounded city police officer hiding in his rural Amish community. When Samuel's mother discovers the weapon, she calls the old bearded grandfather who takes Samuel in his lap and they talk about the shiny black gun on the family dining room table:

"This gun of the hand is for the taking of human life," says the grandfather. "We believe it is wrong to take life. ... Would you kill another man?"

"I would only kill a bad man," the boy replies.

"Only the bad man. ... I see. And you know these bad men by sight? You are able to look into their hearts and see this 'badness?'"

"I can see what they do. I have seen it."

"And having seen, you become one of them. Don't you understand? What you take into your hands" — he pauses, placing his hand on Samuel's chest — "you take into your heart."

The Realm of God is not only what we desire in society. It is what we hold, now, within our hearts.

I said we were also going to look at the matter of gun violence from the perspective of Ethics of Christian Freedom in Community.

Imagine yourself part of the Christian community in Galatia in about 50-60 CE. You've been told by missionaries that Christ has set you free from living under the Jewish law. That's good news, but leaves you confused. The laws of Moses are ponderous, but at least they are clear. Without the law, how will you know what is sin? How will you know what pleases God? When it is the Spirit you are following, Paul writes, not your misguided selfish instincts, you'll see the results in compassion and peace in the

community. Yes, freedom from the Law has risks and responsibilities and there are difficult choices about how to use one's freedom. This is how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: "*It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love. Put your own limits on the freedom Christ has given you. Tougher limits. You'll know when you have crossed the line.*"

Cities and states with the most guns per capita also have the most homicides per capita. Has American society crossed the line? 88 guns per 100 citizens. In this country, we have more freedoms than citizens of any other country. Our founders who left oppressive European governments made sure that in their new country, personal freedoms would be guaranteed by law.

But not every freedom granted either by God, or by country, benefits the community. That is the ethic Christians live by. Children do not benefit when criminals can purchase guns without a background check at gun shows.

The truly disturbing fact is that guns do not necessarily create a safer home. At least one researcher found that gun owners are 4 to 6 times more likely to be a victim of gun violence than to use their weapon successfully in self-defense. (Hemenway, David and Deborah Azrael, *Violence and Victims* 15(3) (2000) 257-272). So why?

Similarly, John Calvin (it's good to turn to Calvin when preaching a difficult subject) in his commentary on the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill", writes, "God has bound the whole human race by a kind of unity; the safety of all ought to be considered as entrusted to each" (Institutes, Book II Chapter VIII Number 39). Some might say he's referring to armed self-appointed neighborhood watchers, but I don't think John intended that.

What would it look like for Christians to advocate for freedoms which benefit the most vulnerable among us because we are living for one another's safety, not merely for our own?

The PCUSA Studypaper "Gun Violence, Gospel Values" puts it succinctly: "If preserving your (our) guns has become more important than the safety of thousands of other people, then weapons have become you (our) idol, in diametric opposition to the vision of a city that is a joy, where children and old people live out their years and the weeping of grief-stricken mothers is no longer heard." (Gun Violence, Gospel Values p. 17)

Ethics in the Reign of God. Ethics of Freedom in Community. Two frameworks in which Christians might reflect on gun violence. Talking isn't enough. Rev. J. Herbert Nelson, the Director of Public Witness in the Presbyterian Church (USA) National Office, wrote this in a sermon two weeks ago: "Our church can and should lead the way in the broader faith community to the creation of a broad-based social movement to prevent gun violence, beginning with and led by an opening to the Holy Spirit, and drawing its strength from the grassroots, especially people in the pews. ***Such a coalition of congregations and other faith communities can take practical direct action on local levels while generating critical change in cultural norms and attitudes toward guns, their possession, distribution, and use.***" (Sermon as prepared for Second Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Baltimore, MD by Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II Sunday, July 14, 2013)

SERMON TOPIC: The Difference a Gun Can Make

I wonder if this is something we can do together, Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, not just for us in peaceful little Holland, but for our neighbors.

For our neighbors. The new world coming is for them, too.

Let us pray:

You give us a vision for a better, for a different world of peace and love and joy. Grant us courage, and faith, and compassion such that we might act now as if the fullness of the world were already here.

To you be the honor and glory, power and dominion, now and forever, Amen.