

FEWER TEARS

How We Can Help to Reduce Violence | Luke 19:41-44

As we come to the Table of our Lord today, I invite you to explore with me a passage from God's Word that seems especially relevant in light of the events of this past week. In Luke's gospel, chapter 19 and verse 41 we read: **As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it...** Why is Jesus crying? For two reasons, I believe.

First, Christ cries because the people of that city – and indeed the nation of Israel itself -- is in such trouble. The country is in a perpetual state of conflict and confusion. Roving bands of marauders prey on travelers, making even normal trips unsafe (Jesus refers to this in his famous story of the Jericho Road). Gangs of armed Zealots launch surprise attacks on Caesars force's. Traumatized soldiers commit acts of brutal overreach that enflame mistrust and hatred. Particularly messed-up people commit murders so heinous that crowds delight in coming out to watch them crucified. The Pharisees fight the Sadducees, the Jews fight the Romans. The Creation that began as a beautiful garden is now a dangerous wilderness.

So, **As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it...and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. (Luke 19:41-43).** Jesus weeps, FIRST, because Israel is in such trouble and God cares deeply about that nation. But he weeps, SECONDLY, because people can't seem to see the fix. They don't see what would bring them real peace.

I want to observe that we also appear to be living in an era where what would bring us peace seems hidden from our eyes. I can't help but imagine that this grieves Jesus too. We could talk today about so many areas of our modern wilderness where peace and vision seem to be missing. I want to reflect today, however, on just ONE of them -- ***the problem of mass shootings*** that have dominated our news again this week. If you are a parent whose younger kids are present with you, I assure you that I do not plan to get graphic about this. Please feel free, however, to exercise discretion as to whether you want to stay for this message or catch it later online.

I will simply start by observing that in the first six months of 2022, there have been 314 mass shootings in America.¹ I'm speaking of incidents where a shooter shoots four or more people and, usually, in a context where people would normally feel SAFE – a supermarket, a school, a holiday parade. All in all, 22,000 Americans have died from gun violence since the start of this year.² No other developed nation comes remotely close to us in this regard.³

But it is not violence in general but the prevalence of events like the one that happened

in Highland Park on July 4 that I want to think about with you today. I spoke on Thursday with a friend who pastors a church in that community. He shared the personal stories of some of the individuals and families touched by this tragedy. I heard this week from a member of our own church whose relative was one of those shot. I remember the stories my State Senator dad heard from parents and kids after the shootings at Sandy Hook, or that another friend of mine heard from someone who was there that day when the gunman entered that Charleston Church and opened fire.

These events ravage parents, create orphans, tear holes in families, and render people so traumatized that they live with haunting fear. And the thing is, it has happened so OFTEN, for so LONG, that you'd think that all of us who serve the Lord of LIFE (especially we in the evangelical church) would be leading the needed change. So, how can we do it? How can we help build a world where there are ***FEWER TEARS?***

Well, as we discussed here last week, life is a complicated Garden. It defies one-step Miracle-Gro solutions. Improving conditions takes lots of inputs and attention to all sorts of processes that make up a system. It takes people working patiently and perseveringly together. The recent bipartisan legislation signed into law feels to me like its engaging some of the key inputs, but I want to speak further to some of them and suggest some more. I will say that, normally, I think it's best for pastors to describe biblical principles and practices and allow you, the people, to discern how those apply to public policy. The crisis in our time has gotten to a point, however, where I am going to blur that line a bit. I hope you'll hang with me.

FIRST of all, I think we could go further in our efforts to repair what is broken if we could avoid caricaturing one another. For example, it would help if we could avoid caricaturing what I would call "ordinary" gun owners -- people who have a pistol for home protection or a long-gun for hunting or sport shooting.

The vast majority of us who fall into this category (and I do) will never fire a gun at anyone. Those of us who are Christians take Jesus at his word when he says that **those who live by the sword, will die by the sword (Matt 26:52)**, so we are respectful and careful when it comes to handling and safeguarding a tool with deadly force. The ordinary gun owner does not idolize guns or identify with the Proud Boys. They are not secret survivalists. They are educated people not ignoramuses. Caricaturing people in this way has done a lot to create anger, division and resistance to the very reform measures with which most Americans would otherwise tend to agree. The Apostle Paul says: **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up (Eph 4:29)**. I hope Christians can help tone down the unhelpful rhetoric.

SECONDLY, and at the same time, I believe that we, as followers of Jesus, could advocate for more common sense measures when it comes to gun laws. If you read the Bible closely then you know that the ethics of Jesus are all about holding creative

tensions. They are about balancing truth with grace, freedom with discipline, rights with responsibilities. In light of this, the stubbornness with which some Christians resist a more balanced sense of stewardship over guns is puzzling. For example, I'm good with having my National Guard son, or the many fine police officers I know, in possession of an assault rifle when they are on duty. But having military-style weapons in the hands of just anyone is coming to make less and less sense to me. How many of us earnestly believe that the Second Amendment anticipated the devastating potential of 21st century weaponry? Why can't we, as Christians, advocate for limiting people's liberty to carry ANY weapon they want, if it might mean fewer little coffins?

THIRDLY, as Christians, we are called to be lifelong learners. In fact, the word "disciple" means "learner." I wonder if one of the roles Jesus might want his followers to play in our time is to be voices for the value of learning from other countries that have confronted mass shooting problems earlier than we have.

Once upon a time, countries like Australia, Canada, Germany, Britain, and Switzerland had a lot of the same carnage we do here. It finally broke their heart to the point where it created a break through. They said ENOUGH and made BIG changes. They got tougher about background checks and waiting periods. They got serious about limiting access to particular weaponry. They instituted gun buy-back programs aimed at reducing the total number of firearms circulating in the system. They invested more of their society's resources in mental health care. And the incidence of tragedies like we've seen in Buffalo, Uvalde, Highland Park and elsewhere this year, began to plummet dramatically.⁴ Proverbs says: **Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm. (Prov 13:20)**. I don't know about you, but I want to learn from the learning of others.

I also think the violence in America today, invites us to wrestle with the question of WHERE we believe our ultimate security lies. No one in ancient Israel was a greater warrior than King David. Yet David once wrote: **Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7)**. David armed himself in the face of the legitimate threats to his life, but he viewed his ultimate security as being in God and not his weaponry.

It strikes me as a strange contradiction that we are a nation with the motto, "***In God We Trust***," but we so dramatically outstrip every other country in the number of guns per capita. If we were demonstrably SAFER because of the volume of our personal armaments, then that might be a form of Christian witness. But do you feel that we are becoming safer? Sadly, there's a lot of evidence that the ready availability of guns is also one of the reasons why we have such a high rate of "successful suicide" in our country or of accidental deaths by gunshots in our homes or of bloodshed in our urban streets. My question is: Do we need to recalibrate our sense of what SECURITY really means and where it comes from?

Our time is short, so let me summarize and then move us to a close. I've been trying to suggest several actions you and I can take as followers of Jesus to create a country of FEWER TEARS. It seems to me that Jesus would care about this. Jesus called us to be a **preserver of life (salt)**. He called us to be a **path-blazer for others (light) (Matt 5:13-16)**. So here's how we can do it..

- First, we can avoid caricaturing people; it just divides us further and makes it harder for us to work in the Garden together to solve problems.
- Secondly, we can advocate for common sense measures that dial down the risk of dangerous weapons landing in irresponsible hands.
- Thirdly, we can be disciples/learners (albeit not in the religious sense) of cultures that are older than America and that have had a reckoning with gun violence and found some effective means of truly reducing the carnage.
- Fourthly, we can do some serious personal evaluation about who or what we truly trust for our ultimate security.
- And, finally, we can be more fully the Church -- a people whose COMMUNION with Christ makes us a remarkable COMMUNITY of concern and care. Let me tell you what I mean by that.

Some years ago, a pair of sociologists named Jillian Peterson and James Densley dedicated themselves to understanding what was going on with these mass shootings in America and how they could be avoided. They went into prisons and interviewed perpetrators of such crimes. They talked to people who planned to do these terrible things but never went through with it. They held discussions with victims' families and associates of the killers and a pattern began to emerge. You can read about it in their book, *THE VIOLENCE PROJECT: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic*,⁵ but let me give you a few of their most important insights because they are so consonant with what God tells us in the Bible.

The FIRST insight is no surprise: We have a tendency to view these people as monsters -- and, at one level, they certainly ARE monstrous. We see pictures of **Robert Crimo III**, the Highland Park shooter, and we focus on his facial tatoos and bizarre characteristics and it helps us separate ourselves from him – to view him as some alien being unrelated to us. [But] say Densley & Peterson: *Mass shooters are not them. They are us—boys and men we know. Our children. Our students. Our colleagues. Our community.* Robert Crimo III had attended more than a few times the Highland Park campus of our sister church, Christ Church Lake Forest. Their very proximity to us gives us opportunity to intervene.

The SECOND important insight is that *"nearly half of all mass shooters and 80% of school mass shooters, communicate intent to do harm ahead of time. They post threats on social media or tell family and friends in person."* In other words, most of the time they cry out in their agony and their disfigurement and in some way are shrieking for

help. This was definitely true of the shooter in Highland Park. His father, peers, even the local police had a lot of information about this young man's disturbed mind and vector.

The challenge is that *"many people don't know what to do with that information or where and how to report it."* And current laws don't allow the level of intervention needed. The two PhD's who've studied this phenomena say that: *"By training ourselves to say something if we see or hear something that gives us pause, and by lobbying for behavioral intervention and threat-assessment teams in our schools and workplaces [and I would say CHURCHES, we] can proactively respond to these warning signs."* I want our church to take a leadership position in our region to help develop such training programs and teams.

The THIRD insight Peterson & Densley offer is that mass shootings are "final acts" for the people who commit them. The shooters intend to die by their own hand, by the bullet of the police, or in a prison. *"This all means classical deterrence mechanisms like harsh punishment or armed security at the door do little to prevent mass shootings. A suicidal shooter may in fact be drawn to a location if they know someone on site is trained to kill them. **Rather than giving desperate people incentive to die, we must give them a reason to LIVE.**"* Isn't that what Jesus said he had come to do? To offer people LIFE and life more abundantly (John 10:10)?

The researchers go on to observe FOURTHLY that almost everyone who has ravaged lives in all the news cycles of our memory has been a person in crisis. *"A crisis overwhelms a person's usual coping mechanisms. A person in crisis is like a balloon ready to pop."* But we, the Church of Jesus, can do something to help with this. We can do it for people whose marriage is about to pop, whose relationship with their mom or dad or children or co-workers or GOD is about to go boom. It's why it's great that you are out there in communities and workplaces all week long where you can build relationships with people in crisis. It is also why being present at church in-person if you can be matters so much. The church needs you here to be one of the people whose concern and care for the people who come here helps relieve some pressure for them.

Jesus said that **the kingdom of God** – the place where people move toward the original flourishing God intended – **is like a mustard seed** (Matt 13:31-33). In other words, even small acts of concern and care can have very large effects. Densley and Peterson say: *"The problems in the lives of mass shooters feel so massive and overwhelming, but sometimes the smallest thing can get someone through a moment. All we must do is let a bit of the air out. We don't have to completely deflate the balloon, or figure out then and there how and why it got so full, or make sure it can never get inflated again."*

Likewise, there are little things we can do at home. *"Most school shooters get their guns from home, which means parents of school-age children can prevent death simply by locking up their firearms... If people can't get their hands on the easiest tools to harm themselves or others, there will be fewer tragedies."* And then the two researchers end by saying this: ***"Mass shootings are not an inevitable fact of American life; they're preventable."***

I wonder if one of you – someone in this room today or watching online – feels like your balloon is close to popping. Maybe you feel that no one sees you and understands the pressure you've been under. I want you to know that JESUS does. He sheds tears for you and wants you to find peace. And, because we belong to Jesus, too, WE see you also. We are concerned for you and want to know more of your story. We're paying attention to the messages you are sending out about the distress you are in. We want to help. Please come experience the blessing of **COMMUNION** with Christ and **COMMUNITY** with all of us. If you will open your heart to us, we will care for you and companion you until your life is filled with HOPE.

This is what the Church of Jesus is all about – REDEMPTION, RENEWAL, and HOPE that there is coming a day when tears will be no more (Rev 21:4). Come to the Table of our Lord and find the grace and peace all of us need.

¹ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/05/nation/there-have-been-least-314-mass-shootings-so-far-2022-there-have-only-been-186-days/>

² <https://www.insider.com/number-of-mass-shootingsin-america-this-year-2022-5>

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-us-gun-violence-world-comparison/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/25/world/europe/gun-laws-australia-britain.html>

⁵ James Densley & Jillian Peterson, *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic* (New York: Abrams Press), September 2021.