

We Belong to God: a Theological Response to Guns and Gun Violence  
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October 8, 2017 Pilgrim Congregational UCC Rev. Karen E. Gale

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Philippians 4: 4-9

Our scripture this morning is a beautiful passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. It was a community struggling with conflict and with some kind of oppression from the outside world. It was a young community of faith founded by Paul and seeking to find its way in the world now that Paul was imprisoned and likely to be killed.

There was fear in the Philippi congregation. Their leader was imprisoned. They had serious conflict in their midst with two founding women at odds with each other. And Paul speaks later in this same letter about being strong in the midst of oppression. So they faced outside threats as well. They are afraid.

And so Paul speaks to them words of comfort. The comfort in knowing that God is present in the world. The comfort that as people of faith they are connected to the great love and great hope present in God and the life of Jesus Christ.

"The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul is reminding them that ultimately everyone and everything is ok. And I mean ultimately. In the midst of their fear, everything is ok. If the world ended tomorrow, which folks in Paul's time believed was entirely possible, they would be ok. God is present and larger and more encompassing than what they can imagine. It will be all right. Ultimately.

This freed the congregation from fear so that they could focus on the present. Focus on what is good and true and just. And focus on doing ministry in Jesus' name despite their fear. In service to those who needed them.

This passage can be so helpful to reflect on when we get caught up in worry and cycles of stress and fear. We can lean on the ever-present, eternal nature of God and know that we are ultimately all right. Ultimately. That is strong statement. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. As Paul writes elsewhere, neither height nor depth nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor principalities. Nothing can separate us from God.

We are held in the Ultimate. That is good news.

Because we live in tumultuous times, too. Fear looms large in our society, in our culture, in our community. And within us.

Fear looms large this week. We live in the now of the Las Vegas shooting: 58 people are dead, nearly 500 people are wounded. Thousands of others--mothers, sons, daughters, fathers, friends, neighbors, co-workers affected. There is loss on a grand scale. And questions. And fear. Lots of fear.

How do we look to the kingdom of God in the midst of this tragedy and the midst of gun violence?

Guns, gun control, gun legislation is one of the most political issues in our country.

But that is not all it is. Guns are also a theological issue, and an issue of social justice. We as faithful people have a voice to speak out about guns and how our faith directs us to respond to gun violence. So how do we as people of faith, speaking from a place of faith, speak about guns?

As part of the United Church of Christ, we have been lifting up a voice of faith to guns for a long time. Back in 1995, the UCC passed a resolution on gun control. Yet again, just this summer, a motion "Guided in large part by the voices of youth, General Synod 2017 enthusiastically passed a resolution of witness urging the recognition of gun violence as a public health emergency deserving of federal funding for scientific research."

Guns and gun laws are about public health. Jesus' ministry was rooted in a ministry of compassionate healing. Jesus was constantly healing people and bringing about compassionate inclusion of those on the margins because of it.

As a faith based body we advocate for health care for the poor, for health care of the elderly, for better care and access for those living with disabilities. Should we not offer a voice advocating for better health in the face of gun violence and the terrible toll it takes?

I imagine you may be familiar with the numbers on gun deaths:

- The US has over 30,000 gun deaths a year, 12,000 of those are homicides.
- In the months from the Orlando shooting until now there have been over 500 mass shootings, defined as an episode where at least 4 people get shot.
- In fact, there have been 7 mass shootings this week including Las Vegas
- 93 Americans are killed with guns every day.
- Of those, Seven are children and teens
- 50 women are shot to death by intimate partners every month.
- 62 % of gun deaths are suicides.

But gun laws are relaxed in part because people are afraid. Afraid that they will be attacked in their home and need to defend themselves even though crime rates in most parts of the country are going down.

People are afraid their children will be killed at school.

And people are afraid now that they will be at a public concert listening to country music and a shooter will fire indiscriminately into the crowd. The fear is real. We can understand that.

But standing on the bedrock of our faith, knowing we are held by God in all things, and called by Jesus to speak truth, we can be educators and advocates about guns. That it doesn't have to be this way that we don't have to live in fear and that in most of the rest of the world, people don't live in fear of guns nor suffer gun related deaths like we Americans do.

My brother's best friend got married last year to a woman from China. Her family had never been to the US before and so they arrived to visit for several weeks for the wedding and to see some sights in New England and beyond. The bride's father had one particular wish on his to do list. It wasn't to see a historical sight or a natural feature. He wanted to go to a gun range and shoot guns. Because that was his impression of what Americans did for fun. That has stayed with me. How America is known primarily for our guns.

Now I am not completely against all guns. I used to be. But it only took a couple of years living in Michigan the nation's leader in car deer hits, and one incredibly scary deer hit of my own to convince me that deer hunting is the most humane and effective way to control pest deer populations--aside from bringing wolf packs into the suburbs.

But this is not what we are talking about. We are talking about how guns, hand guns, semi automatic guns, millions of guns across this country--one for every person living in America--impact the lives of Americans, particularly the poor and oppressed.

As we are called to ministries of social justice to oppressed and the least of these, we reflect on gun violence. How gun violence disproportionately affects communities of color.

While Sandy Hook shocked us with deaths of twenty children and their teachers, actually every three days in this country we have the equivalent of a Sandy Hook, with mostly children of color dying in gun violence. When Jesus looked at children he said, "to such belong the kingdom of God." American kids are fourteen times as likely to die from guns as children in other developed countries, according to David Hemenway of Harvard. How can we see children, all children, children of color in particular, and bring about the kingdom of God for them?

Gun violence also particular affects another vulnerable population, the suicidal. Now despite myths to the contrary, folks suffering mental illness are far less likely to hurt another with a gun. However, they are far more likely to hurt themselves in fatal shootings. One of my best friends lost a sister-in-law to a gun suicide just late month. Like the rising opioid crisis, suicide is also rising in this country. A suicide attempt by gun is 95% effective. Controlling guns, making guns less available in moments of crisis, saves lives. And we as faith-filled people are about saving lives, both spiritual and physically.

These are the vulnerable we are called to support. We are called to share with those in desperation the message of the ultimate love of God. But also to use gun legislation and restriction to ensure better protections for these vulnerable folks.

Battered women are also disproportionately are affected by gun violence. Folks living with disabilities are four times more likely to experience gun violence, something I didn't know until this week. These are the vulnerable that we are called to advocate for and protect. The least of these, in Jesus' words.

Finally, as Christians we are called to peacemaking. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, there are calls for peace. To turn Spears into pruning hooks, swords into plowshares. These were the weapons of mass casualty of Jesus' day. Guns are the weapons of casualty in ours. Peacemaking according to our scriptures means taking guns and turning them into instruments of peaceful, fruitful living.

"The Bible may not speak with one voice about why suffering happens, but it is unanimous in its claim that human suffering demands the active response of faithful people." Rev. Traci Blackmon, UCC.org

What could we do as people of faith in response to gun violence?

--join others in the UCC and other faith bodies who are holding a vigil in mid December to bring attention and advocacy to gun violence issues

--call on our representatives and other leaders to ask for better and stronger gun legislation

--we can talk to our family members and friends: if they have guns, do they keep them unloaded, locked up and away from where children can find them. If we own guns, do we practice good gun safety?

-we can pray for change. Change in hearts, change in minds towards compassion and care for those who will die in gun violence and a willingness to put that first instead of our fear.

For Paul tells us to reflect on such virtues:

Whatever is true

Whatever is just

Whatever is commendable

Whatever has excellence and is worthy of praise

Keep doing what you have seen and heard and learned and received.

Keep on doing it. Keep on. For the faith journey is long. And the road of peacemaking is long. And the fight for justice is long. And the discussion about guns will be long.

But the God of peace will be with us. Amen.