

Lead Us Not Into Temptation
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
May 29, 2022

I want Jesus to walk with me.

I grew up singing this hymn - do y'all know it?

I want Jesus to walk with me. I want Jesus to walk with me. All along this pilgrim journey, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me...¹

There is a parable by Rev. Fred Craddock.

A missionary family was serving far away - and they were placed under house arrest by the dictatorial local government. Perhaps they'd preached Jesus' love and justice too often?

Soldiers came one day and said, "You can return to America."

The family began to celebrate and the soldiers said to the parents, "You can take two hundred pounds with you."

Well, they'd been there for years. Two hundred pounds! They got the scale out and the family started arguing. Must have this vase. This is a new typewriter! What about my books? And they weighed everything and added and subtracted and finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds.

The soldiers came back. Ready to go?

Yes.

Did you weigh everything?

Yes.

You weighed the kids?

No, we didn't.

Weigh the kids.

And in that moment the vase, the typewriter, the books, were all trash.²

¹ From the African-American spiritual.

² *Craddock Stories*. Pages 22-23.

This week, once again, our nation faced a choice between children's lives and personal freedoms. What does it mean that 19 children's lives and two of their teachers were not valued more than the intractable gun lobby?

12 children die from gun violence every day in the US. There have been 950 school shootings since Sandy Hook, 27 of them this year.³

On Tuesday, I got a message from a former parishioner who now lives in Texas, not too far from Uvalde. Rev. Reebee, she wrote, please pray for these children. Their pictures were attached. When she sent the message some of their fates were uncertain. She reached out to everyone she knew to pray that some of them, somehow, might live. They did not. Their teachers did not.

Today, and this week, is a time of lament...but the lament did not begin this week and will not end this week, so lament cannot stand on its own. That so many beloved children of God should die because of gun violence, and that this is so common that we know it will only be a few days before the next time is unfathomable. It is unfathomable that before LICA even had the chance to make a statement about Buffalo, we had to pivot and write about three mass shootings - a white nationalist in a grocery store targeting African-Americans, a church shooting targeting Taiwanese folks, and a broken young man, barely out of childhood himself, ending 21 lives. Unchecked racism; untreated violent mental illness, and unfettered access to assault weapons that exist for no other purpose than ending human life.

Christ have mercy.

In my trials, Lord, walk with me.

In my trials, Lord, walk with me.

When my heart is almost breaking,

Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

³ <https://www.wbur.org/npr/1101774780/gun-control-debate-statistics>

Folks, I'm angry. I'm fearful, I'm frustrated, I'm exhausted, and I'm grieving, and I imagine that all of us are mad, afraid, fed up, tired and sorrowful.

Scripture says,

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and will save those whose spirits are crushed." (Psalm 34)

And this is one of those Sundays when I am praying that our ancestors in faith spoke truth in their testimony. *Lord, we need you every hour, and this hour, O Lord, we need you.* Walk with us, when our hearts are breaking, when we are weeping and cannot be consoled. Give us courage for the living of this hour.

I was convicted by the words of a neighboring pastor this week, Bob Brown of Concord:

"We know that our elected officials are failing to offer leadership at this critical moment in history. The question is: Will Christians and communities of faith do the same? We are way past the moment where predictabilities of polite caution and "purple church" politics can provide us cover for our inaction. We are not talking about differences in policies at the theoretical level anymore. We are facing into the very meaning of what it means to be Christian...and what it doesn't....As followers in the way of Jesus, without hesitation or equivocation, we must speak specifically against gun violence, but also against poverty, racism, homophobia, toxic masculinity, and sexism."⁴

*When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me.
When I'm in trouble, Lord, walk with me.
When my head is bowed in sorrow,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.*

⁴ Via Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/destinypictures/posts/10223923140039546>

Today, I was scheduled to reflect on one last part of the Lord's Prayer - Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. And so I will.

Jesus, in the wilderness, before his ministry launched, was tempted and tested by the devil - tempted to embrace earthly power, economic power, political power, religious power - some of the same temptations we face today. He chose a different way, not the way of power over. He chose to follow God's call

to proclaim good news to the poor.

freedom for the prisoners

recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free, and to

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4)

And Jesus taught us to pray, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Lead us not into temptation.

Lead us not into the temptation of despair, for despair excuses inaction.

Lead us not into the temptation of cynicism, for cynicism denies the possibility of change.

Lead us not into the temptation of othering and distancing - it couldn't happen here; I'm glad it wasn't someone I knew; if only *they* would take action.

Lead us not into the temptation of staying on the sidelines.

Lead us not into the temptation of numbness, for our hearts should be broken, again, and every time.

Lead us not into the temptation of stigmatizing folks facing mental illness, for we know that folks facing mental illness are more likely to be victims of a violent crime than to commit one. But let us make sure that adequate counseling is available to everyone in need. Let us make sure that when someone tells the world they're about to lash out - the world intervenes.

Lead us not into the temptation of stopping at thoughts and prayers. Our prayers should be efforts to align ourselves with God's will - and surely God's will is to stop the slaughter of innocent people.

As Abram Cressman wrote, at age 15 - just after the Parkland school shooting - " 'Pray like God is always listening, but act as if you are the only one who can do something about it.' If you really believe that God will do something, then make sure he knows you're doing something too..."⁵

But deliver us from evil. Deliver us from the evil of gun lobbies, corporate greed, and the power-hungry.

Deliver us from evil. Deliver us from the evil that says, there's nothing we can do.⁶ Deliver us from the evil of accepting political deadlock. The headline in the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, repeated every time there is a mass shooting, reads " 'No Way To Prevent This,' Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens."⁷

Deliver us from evil. Bring us to the place where we can understand and intervene and stand against whatever causes and undergirds white supremacy, white nationalism, replacement theory, racism, hatred in every form.

⁵ <https://www.backstorypreaching.com/blog/a-ninth-grader-writes-an-open-letter-to-preachers-after-the-florida-shootings?rq=abram&fbclid=IwAR2-C4XEziBYEmfmsEJIPiBJ2COXEtrH-aOjFPHVWjYwTBeZ5BDmE8dHs>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/25/opinion/texas-shooting-gun-control.html>

⁷ TheOnion.com,

<https://www.theonion.com/no-way-to-prevent-this-says-only-nation-where-this-r-1848971668>

Deliver us from evil. Direct us to find the resources so that no teenager is bullied, isolated, left behind, forgotten, and no warning sign ignored.

Deliver us from evil. There is no purpose in an AR-15 in the hands of a private individual except mass murder. God, give us all the determination and persistence and courage to tell every leader of every party to ban assault weapons, no more excuses. Let us turn swords into plowshares - and as a church in Springfield is doing this week - guns into garden tools.

Deliver us from evil. Deliver our children, our elders, our neighbors from danger. Christ have mercy.

Amen.