

EASTER VII – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Most of the time when I begin preparing a sermon, I try to clear my mind as much as possible to hear what is in the lessons for the day that has the chance to speak to each and all of us about God and God's love and God's will. At times there is something going on in the midst of all our lives that is so pressing, so burdensome, so consuming of our attention that I scour those passages of scripture or the liturgy itself for a word or phrase or situation that can speak to such a matter. Today is one of those days.

Fifteen days ago, there was yet another shooting in what we generally consider a safe or neutral place, a grocery store. It was a racially motivated hate crime—something which is no longer uncommon in our nation. This past Tuesday there was yet another mass shooting, also in what we generally consider a safe or neutral place, an elementary school which could have been in Minocqua or Woodruff or many of the other towns around here. In Uvalde, TX, two teachers and 19 children were murdered, all or most of them Hispanic. That is a massacre.

During some news program this week I heard that since 2008, there have been 288 such school shootings in the United States, the worst record of any country in the world. The country with the second-worst record had 8 school shootings during the same time.

Both of the killers were 18yo boys—I use that term to describe those whose brain development is not yet sufficient for them to comprehend anything of the real magnitude of what they were doing.

This is like a six-year-old playing with matches. The consequences for the 6yo MAY end up being very destructive. The consequences of an 18yo playing with an assault weapon are guaranteed to be horribly destructive and cost many lives.

There are some noteworthy things that we put age limits on in our society: you have to be 21 to get a drink legally in most places; you have to be 21 to get a license to drive a semi-trailer truck, because it is far too dangerous to entrust to someone whose brain is not fully developed. You have to be 25 to rent a car. And yet an 18yo can buy an assault weapon and ammunition which is so dangerous that if one were to use it for hunting, there would be nothing left to eat. They had to identify some of the children by DNA because their faces and bodies were shredded. We can wonder why anyone who is not in the military needs to have an assault rifle, but that question doesn't even come up.

There are other things that we don't trust anyone to get without special permission, like a prescription, such as Sudafed, which a mother with a houseful of children with allergies cannot buy no matter her family history and her best judgment. Try to hold in your mind a couple of Sudafed and an assault rifle and ask which is more dangerous. Go further and ask yourself whether either of them does any good.

Yes, I am being political today. Why? Because this is a political problem at its core. In the societies where gun safety is valued and practiced, the number of deaths due to homicide or suicide by a gun is vastly smaller than in our society. Look up any statistic about gun violence and see if you can find any country other than Brazil that comes anywhere near our record of death and destruction.

Why is this a political problem? Because it infects our society like a virus, eating away at our core, infecting no other country. Years ago I got a bookmark from Grace Cathedral, SF, which had these words: "Good Lord, have mercy upon us, lest our hearts grow hard." We have passed over the deaths of children in 288 schools, doing nothing to stop any more deaths. I would say that's a rather grim picture of how hard-hearted a nation can be. Democracy, our form of government, is at stake. Even more, our national soul and our personal souls are at stake. *Good Lord, have mercy upon us, lest our hearts grow hard.*

Why is it a political problem? Because the laws to deal with these matters are created (OR NOT CREATED) by politicians, namely the US Congress. Fifty Senators are holding 85-95% of us Americans hostage to what they want. That's the percentage of us that value gun safety over the utter lack of it we have now. Obviously, that percentage must include the vast majority of Americans who are gun owners and have a healthy perspective on what guns are for, how to use them, and how to keep them from getting in the hands of those who do not.

Hanging in my home is a piece of artistic calligraphy given to me by a former senior warden because she said it reminded her of me. The citation is from Dante's Inferno and reads like this: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, do nothing." Let me repeat that: *The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, do nothing.*

I do not know that I believe God has created that sort of hell, but I understand the depth of Dante's fury, that when we stand silent in the face of God's clear teaching in scripture and particularly in the life and witness of Jesus Christ, we are participating in evil. Most of the time we think of evil as something that we consciously choose to do that causes harm.

Please understand; it may turn out horribly bad when we do something harmful that we did not intend, but when we intend it; when we contemplate the consequences and go ahead and cause the harm with equanimity or even glee, that is doing evil, that is when we are in league with the forces of death and destruction that undermine not only life and safety, but also hope, and confidence, and stability and, of course, peace of any kind.

We must think further on this: evil can be something we choose not to do that causes harm. When we withhold our power to correct something to increase human safety, to value human life, we may be committing just as much evil as if we consciously choose to cause harm.

How often have these fifty senators and their predecessors, and their fellow demagogues in the House of Representatives and in legislatures and governors' houses throughout the United States, withheld their power to bring about safety? How often? Just about every time this issue has come before them, at least since the Sandy Hook massacre TEN YEARS AGO.

I hope a lot of you got to see the clip of the press conference given by the coach of the Golden State Warriors. He said something like, "I am tired of having one more moment of silence after yet another mass shooting and then doing nothing about it until the next moment of silence."

I hope you heard Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut who has been a champion of gun safety since the Sandy Hook massacre. On the floor of the Senate, he kept repeating, "Why are we here? We are the ones who can do something to stop all of this, and we never do. Why are we here? Why are you here?"

I keep on trying to have hope for our country, but I no longer hold any optimism at all. The force of evil, of preserving one's political power and position no matter what the cost to others, is so strong in these fifty senators and their counterparts in State government. Further, there are no signs of their power lust being broken, healed, changed. How many thousands of lost lives, children's lives, have not melted their hearts? *Lest our hearts grow hard...* Some of them have turned to stone.

It seems to me that the only way to bring about any change in gun safety laws is to remove some people from the positions of control they now occupy. We need to be very clear when we go to the polls this summer and fall about which offices in government have anything to do with these laws. And we need to study the backgrounds—both the voting records and the writings and speeches of those aspiring for election. Single-issue voting can be dangerous much or most of the time, but in this election, there are three or four issues which will shape our lives and culture for a long time to come. Those issues require our intense scrutiny.

I have another question, but first listen to what Jesus prays to God at the end of the passage we have today:

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

I believe that and have believed it for a long time, because I had the opportunity to learn it in a much safer world, when it is easier to believe in the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. Before I had much intellectual consciousness and any conscience at all, WWII, with all its evils was over, and it was only a *memory* of living hell, no longer the ever-present reality of it. These massacres have become the ever-present reality of hell for the children of our nation, where we have lost the sense of safe places. How does someone growing up in this time hear the words of Jesus about love, about being one with God and each other amidst the ceaseless noise of automatic weapons echoing through school corridors?

Thursday night on my TV screen I saw the pictures of the ten members of the select Senate committee to find ways to end gun violence. Among the five Democrats were Senators Sinema and Manchin who have voted against any and every piece of legislation on this issue to come before the Senate. So, the very committee set up to work on this issue is stacked seven to three against doing anything, people who have already disclosed their hearts of stone.

If Congress is not going to do anything really constructive for meaningful and effective change about gun safety, then it is up to us to act in the only way left to us: vote them all out as soon as we can—and any people like them down the ballot. This is one of those rare issues when we can truly discern what is acting on God's side and what is not.

Amen.

+JLJ