

Clackamas United Church of Christ
Rev. Adam Ericksen
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Today we join with faith communities across Oregon and the United States as we participate in End Gun Violence Sabbath. Gun violence impacts our communities in many ways, from lives lost, bodies injured, school children subjected to active shooter drills, and others terrorized by fear. We lift our voices for a vision of peace and safety from gun violence. We mourn every life lost too soon from gun violence. We commit to work for a safer world.

May our children and youth grow up in the world they deserve, free from fear. May we all do what we can to help make that world possible.

Lives have been torn by gun violence across our country and world. Forgive us for putting gun ownership above life, for letting the power of money control our decisions, for letting the few control our legislation, and for forgetting that every life is a precious gift from you.

Lead us on the path of healing and peace. Help us to turn our weapons into plowshares. Guide us in the way forward as we seek to change the minds of our elected leaders. Strengthen us in our endeavors to bring an end to gun violence and drench us in your Holy Spirit, so that we may not give up the struggle.

Today, because of the divisiveness prompted by leadership as well as extremist nationalism, religious intolerance, xenophobia, racism, and other phobias and 'isms,' our country has become more violent and intolerant than ever before.

Pain or gain is the question. In light of tragedies such as Sandy Hook Elementary, San Bernardino, Gilroy Garlic Festival, and more recently El Paso, Dayton, and many other ever-increasing acts of violence, now termed domestic terrorism across our country, what will be our response?

It's tempting to become pessimistic ... But pessimism is not a Christian virtue. Hopeless is not a word in the Christian vocabulary.

Jesus was showing us possibilities, not impossibilities.

It "is like a nightmare you can't wake up from."

Those were the [words spoken](#) by Laren Wells this last Thursday. Laren is a sophomore at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, California, where there was another school shooting this last week.

Indeed, it is a nightmare.

Lauren and other children throughout the country have had to go through active shooter trainings at their schools. Tragically, there is a need to do those trainings because [so far in 2019](#), there have been 46 weeks of school and there have been 44 school shootings.

My oldest son recently asked us at dinner, "Are you ever afraid to send me to school?"

The question was out of the blue and took me by surprise. After fumbling for an answer, I told him that statistically the chances of an active shooter coming to his school are very low.

But tell that to Laren Wells and the students at Saugus High School. Tell that to the students at the other 43 schools where there have been shootings. Sometimes statistics aren't helpful in the midst of their nightmare.

But we have been living this nightmare of gun violence for a long time.

The nightmare goes beyond school shootings, of course. Yesterday was the 320th day of the year. According to the research group Gun Violence Archive, in those 320 days we have already had [369 mass shootings](#) in the United States. We have already had more mass shootings than days in the year, and we still have a month and a half left in 2019.

Sometimes I fall into despair because if as a nation we refused to do anything about gun violence after the murders of elementary school children at Sand Hook, then what would ever make us try to solve this problem?

Sometimes I'm tempted to throw up my hands, give up all hope, and say that the nightmare is the new normal in the United States.

But then I listened to Charlie's sermon from last week.

I felt like Charlie was speaking directly to me when he said that, "It's tempting to become pessimistic ... But pessimism is not a Christian virtue. Hopeless is not a word in the Christian vocabulary. Jesus was showing us possibilities, not impossibilities."

I needed to hear Charlie say that because I'm tempted to become pessimistic. I'm tempted to grow accustomed to the nightmare, to think that this violence is just the way things are. But we need to be very clear: averaging more than one mass shooting a day is not normal.

Other developed countries watch the same movies and play the same video games. But they do not have nearly as many mass shootings. [In fact](#), "gun homicide rates are 25(.2) times higher in the U.S. than in other high-income countries."

So, we should ask, what is the difference?

[Americans own more guns per capita than any other nation.](#) And it isn't even close.

[The United States](#) has 120 guns per 100 people.

The next country is Yemen, which has 53 guns per 100 people.

In his book, "Private Guns, Public Health," gun researcher at Harvard, David Hemenway, claims, "Within the United States, a wide array of empirical evidence indicates that more guns in a community leads to more homicide." More guns means more murders.

People often say that they want guns in their house because it makes them safe. But the opposite is generally true. More guns in the home means more nightmares in the home. [In fact](#), “States with more guns [in homes] see more accidental deaths from firearms, and children ages 5 to 14 are 11 times more likely to be killed with a gun in the US compared to other developed countries, where gun ownership is much less common.”

We have a nightmare of a gun problem. But our gun problem extends beyond the massive amounts of private gun ownership in the United States. The United States government has the same problem.

Our government spends \$650 billion dollars on our military. That is more than China, Saudi Arabia, India, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany combined.

And still, that’s not enough. The amount of spending on the military is only going up. And yet no politician and no one in the media ever ask how we can afford to pay upwards of \$700 billion dollars on the military.

We have a violence problem in the United States. It is a spiritual issue.

Because on our money we have the phrase, “In God We Trust.” But our nation doesn’t trust in God. We trust in guns. We trust in drones. We trust in fighter jets and aircraft carriers. We trust in the idol that has become the second amendment.

There’s a [psalm](#) in the Bible that says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

The chariot and the horse were the tanks of the ancient world. The writer of this psalm says that we aren’t going to trust in weapons of war because they lead to a world of nightmares. We are going to trust in God’s dream of love and peace.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned a day when the nations and peoples of the world would “beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Isaiah was right. The fact is that we learn violence. We learn war. It is a learned behavior. And we need to stop learning those things.

And maybe Jesus is our greatest teacher in this regard.

In our passage today that Sharon read, Jesus talks about a time of change and chaos. There would be times of wars and insurrections. He warned his disciples that they might be arrested and even persecuted.

To be clear, Jesus and his disciples weren’t arrested and persecuted because they simply said, “Hey guys, let’s just love one another and get along to get along, okay?”

They were arrested because they refused to become pessimistic about the violence and oppression in their society. Instead, they sought to actively challenge that system of oppression and violence. They entered into the nightmare with their God given dreams of peace and justice. They challenged an unjust and violent system and the system fought back.

But did you notice how Jesus told his disciples to respond to those who arrested and persecuted them? Jesus said, “When they arrest you and persecute you, that’s the time for you to lift up your sword and kill the jerks!”

No. He didn’t say that. Jesus didn’t want to respond to the nightmare of violence by adding more violence to the nightmare.

Instead, he told his disciples that when they are arrested and persecuted, that when even family members turn against them, that it was their time to testify.

And Jesus said that he would give his followers the words they would say. Those words would be similar to the words that Jesus spoke. Yes, they were words of radical love, but they were also words of radical justice and nonviolence.

Jesus upended the status quo. He frequently used the phrase, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” This reversal wasn’t an act of revenge where the oppressors and the oppressed merely switched places. Rather, it was a way of saying that those who are last in human societies, those who are houseless, those who are hungry, those who are immigrants, those who suffer violence, will no longer be victimized, but will be loved.

And for Jesus, the way to this radical change was through nonviolence. When his disciples tried to protect him with the sword, Jesus said to them, “Put your sword back in it’s place, for all who live by the sword die by the sword.”

And today, Jesus would come to us and say, “Put your gun back in its place, for all who live by the gun die by the gun.”

Jesus knew that weapons of violence only make life more dangerous. They only add to the nightmare. And so he invites us to put our weapons down and trust in the God of love and life that he revealed.

We have a long way to go as a nation before we finally wake up from our nightmare of gun violence, but the good news is that people are waking up.

[In 2018](#), a “Gallup poll found that 61 percent of Americans thought gun laws should be more strict.” A “Monmouth poll found that 83 percent of respondents supported background checks for all gun sales.” Another poll “found that 75 percent of respondents thought background check laws ought to be made stronger.”

And somewhere around [70 percent](#) of NRA members want universal background checks on gun purchases. 78 percent of non-NRA gun owners want universal background checks.

If everyone were to vote we would change gun legislation because the vast majority of people want these changes. So we need to get people to go out and vote for candidates and policies so that we can move in this direction.

These gun measures are important steps, but of course they won't stop every act of gun violence. There is something else we need and maybe men need this the most. As Isaiah said, we learn how to be violent from our culture. The dominant message from culture teaches us that to be a man means we need to be tough. That's what being an alpha male is all about. From our government to our gun culture, to be a man is to know how to wield violence.

Rarely are we men ever taught how to manage our emotions in nonviolent, peaceful, and productive ways. Instead of talking out our emotions, our frustration, our pain, we are implicitly or explicitly taught to burry it inside, only for it to explode upon someone else, often with violence. And so as we work on gun legislation, we also need to help all of us, but especially men, manage our anger and frustrations in nonviolent ways.

Instead of being trained in the ways of violence and war, we need to train ourselves in the ways of nonviolent action and peace.

And as Gandhi said, We need to be the change we want to see in the world. Changing our culture of violence starts with you. It starts with me. Be that change in your family. Be that change in your church. Be that change in your neighborhood. Be that change, because we need to wake up from this nightmare. May we be the change. Amen.