

For Safety in the Streets

by

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Romans 13:8-12

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Zechariah 8:1-8

The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying: ²Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. ³Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. ⁵And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ⁶Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? ⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

Still reeling from the news of the racist attack that gunned down ten black grocery shoppers in Buffalo, and just five days after the shooting in Uvalde, my husband Larry and I flew to Austin, Texas, for the wedding of a dear family friend. We stayed in an apartment on the campus of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which is at one end of the long central pedestrian corridor of the University of Texas.

Not only were we aware of how close we were to Uvalde geographically; but I also realized that one of my childhood memories includes the first mass shooting in the United States from the Tower of the University of Texas. I was seven-years-old in 1966 when Charles Whitman took rifles to the observation deck of the Tower, and opened fire indiscriminately on people below. In ninety-six minutes he shot and killed 14 people and injured 31 others. At the time the attack was the deadliest mass shooting by a lone gunman in U. S. history. Anyone who grew up in the 1960's as I did has salient childhood memories of gun violence.

Now, of course I have happy childhood memories especially of summertime – long family car trips to National Parks; roaming the neighborhood on roller skates, playing kick-the can with friends and nights catching lighting bugs, and stretching out to watch for shooting stars. But I am also aware of how my own free-roaming childhood memories are punctuated by the memory of specific acts of violence.

I do remember the University of Texas shooting and two years later, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr, and Robert Kennedy. Fast forward into my adult years, the Columbine High School shooting happened the year we sent our first born to public school in Atlanta, Virginia Tech not long after we moved to a new church in Columbia. So welcoming was this congregation after its long interim when I came here to preach my candidating sermon, you may not remember it was also the weekend of Sandy Hook. I remember getting up early that Sunday morning at the Wayne Hotel to revise my sermon in response to those twenty-seven children and teachers shot down in an elementary

school ten days before Christmas. Likewise, a few years later, Frank Pottorff and I scrambled to revise Ash Wednesday worship in the Chapel at the last minute because the number of Parkland High School dead ticked up to seventeen about thirty minutes before that service.

That's just a short list of my recollections because they intersected with other significant life moments, and I know I've left out the concerts, the churches and synagogues, and so many other incidents of gun violence that may come to your mind for similar reasons. Our childhoods, our lives, our ministry together, our worship for far too long have been punctuated by grief and anger over gun violence. And, in recent weeks – Buffalo, Uvalde, Philadelphia's South Street, a total of 17 killed and 62 injured just last weekend from mass shootings of four or more across the United States. When are we going to get the guns off the streets? When are we going to get the guns off the streets?

Now, we know that one act of legislation won't solve a problem that is politically complex and has deep roots in everything from the Second Amendment to domestic violence to mental health issues of trauma, despair, and isolation. But guns are the issue in the endless mass shootings. To quote Jim Wallis, "To say otherwise is to distort and distract from the facts. In particular, military grade automatic weapons designed to kill as many people as possible are the primary cause of mass shootings."¹

Gun manufacturers are choosing profits over people; and weapons are available for purchase by teenagers with brains not yet fully developed. This is a primary moral, ethical challenge of our time. The church is being called anew to get in the faces of our political leaders and to do everything in our power to persuade and to demand gun reform legislation, or vote them out of office.

¹ Jim Wallis eNews letter "God's Politics with Jim Wallis", June 2, 2022.

Now, there will be those people who consider this a hot button political issue, and as such think it should not be discussed in church. But that has never been the Presbyterian way, and it is a misunderstanding of the meaning of the Separation of Church and State. The Separation of Church and State does not mean that the church stays out of politics. It means that people of faith stand across the street from the State House, and we speak Truth to Power.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we believe that there are truths over which people of good character may differ. However, there is the abiding affirmation that God's redeeming, reconciling work is taking place not only in individual lives, but also in the societies of which we are a part.

No one articulated this more clearly than our theological forebear, John Calvin. The final chapter of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is devoted entirely to politics. Calvin wrote: "Wherefore no doubt ought now be entertained by any person that civil magistracy is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but by far the most sacred and honorable in human life."

Just imagine if more of our elected leaders today were to perceive their calling as sacred as opposed to maintaining power.

Born in France, a child of 16th century intellectual humanism, reared by pious, devoutly Christian parents, Calvin was trained for the law, but intrigued by the Bible. He preferred the intellectual pursuit of the academy, but he was propelled by the God revealed in scripture into public life where he lived out a dual role: that of theologian and preacher; and that of politician and public servant. When politics raised the question: "Who is in charge here – who has the authority – who makes the rules – how are people treated?" Those were for Calvin theological questions. Moreover, when faith considers that *Justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream*, the

implications of that Biblical mandate are, for Calvin, and for us, clearly political.

Listen to this description from McNeill's classic history of Calvin: "After the 1557 election, the town council, under Calvin's leadership, ordered a reforming visitation of the city. Servants were admonished to attend church and parents to send their children to school. Nurses of babies were warned not to go to bed with them lest they smother them. No fires would be permitted in rooms without chimneys. Chimneys were to be swept for safety. Latrines were to be provided for houses in which they were lacking, and the night-watch was to be duly performed." All such public matters came within Calvin's own care, attests the historian. "Calvin was asked to sit in judgment on an invention for cheaper heating for houses. It was at his suggestion that railings were ordered for the balconies of houses for the safety of children. Also, as early as December, 1554, he prompted Council to introduce the manufacture of cloth in order to provide a livelihood for the unemployed poor. And the first dentist who appeared in Geneva was not licensed until Calvin had personally attested to his skill."²

Friends, we Presbyterians descend directly from a religious tradition that affirms the political decisions for human community are precisely the arena for acting out God's purposes for God's people. The Bible repeatedly testifies that the God of history cares about the ordering of human society and the welfare of human persons, particularly the vulnerable ones. Nowhere is this biblical vision more beautifully described, nor specifically detailed than by the prophet Zechariah.

Zechariah preached to a people who knew violence, who were the victims of random and unnecessary desolation and warfare. They had been taken captive by the Babylonians, uprooted, carried off from their

² McNeill's history quoted from sermon by P.C. Ennis, "In Praise of Politics" preached at Central Presbyterian, Atlanta.

homeland and forced into the servitude of their captors. After long years as exiles, when the Persian Empire became the controlling power, the more benevolent Persians allowed the people of ancient Israel to return to their homeland. During the time of this prophesy, the Israelites were attempting to rebuild their community in Jerusalem. Disheartened as they were, if the people could be made to see what Zechariah saw; if they could imagine a world as God intended it, then they would respond by living toward that vision. They would not only pray for peace; they would become peacemakers. They would not just offer God their praises, they would enact their worship with deeds. They would take care of the most vulnerable: provide for the poor, care for the elderly, and protect the young.

Zechariah describes it precisely: “The old shall again sit in the streets with staff in hand because of their great age; the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets.” According to the prophet, the reign of God will look like the most wonderful public park.³ The elderly will talk, and bask in the sun, and watch little children at play in contentment and safety with nothing to threaten them, no one to make them afraid, and certainly no one to mow them down with an assault rifle which is designed not only to kill but to mutilate. This prophetic vision of Zechariah is clear: God created humankind to live together in peace and security, for the safety of boys and girls playing in the streets.

In the tradition of Calvin, we Presbyterians hold a political responsibility for human welfare as an opportunity to glorify God. When New Zealand experienced a mass shooting in 2019, that country acted in just 26 days to tighten gun laws. Here in America, it has been fifty-six years since one of the first gun massacres from the University

³ Biblical interpretation of Zechariah's prophesy was taken from Elizabeth Achtemeier's Interpretation Commentary, Nahum - Malachi.

of Texas Tower in 1966 claimed all those innocent lives.⁴ We cannot count the number of deaths to gun violence since.

It is past time for our lament and grief, our shame and repentance to turn into action. We are being called by God to do everything we can in church and in politics to realize that vision for the safety of the boys and girls of our homeland. God's word is clear.

AMEN.

⁴ Nicholas Kristof, "These Gun Reforms Could Save 15,000 Lives. We Can Achieve Them," *New York Times*, May 25, 2022