

C Lectionary 19 8.11.19

Luke 12:32-40

Focus Statement: Jesus calls us to a different world

This is the two-hundred and twenty-third day of 2019, and there have been two-hundred and fifty-five mass shootings this year, resulting in two-hundred and seventy-five dead and one-thousand and fifty-five injured. That works out to more than one mass shooting for every day of 2019.

I got these statistics from the Gun Violence Archive, a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide online, public access to statistics about gun-related incidents in the US. The Gun Violence Archive defines a mass shooting as an incident in which at least four people, not including the gunman are killed or injured. In addition to mass shootings, there have been thirty-three thousand, two-hundred and thirty-seven total gun incidents in 2019, resulting in eight-thousand, seven-hundred and ninety-six gun deaths, and seventeen-thousand, four-hundred and eighty injuries. To put that in context, numbers-wise the entire population of Albion has been killed in gun-related incidents this year, and the city of Wayne has been injured. I checked these statistics Tuesday, so this is just as of Tuesday. Who knows what's happened since then.

So when our Gospel reading for this morning starts out with Jesus saying, "Do not be afraid, little flock," I have to admit, I am afraid. I grew up going to the Gilroy Garlic Festival, I'm not a regular patron of Wal-Mart, but I do frequent the occasional box store. I like to see movies, I coach in a school, these have all been scenes of inexplicable violence. And more frightening for me than the random mass shooter is the known one. The United States has

the highest rate of domestic violence related gun deaths of women in the developed world. One in four women in this country have experienced domestic violence, and the abuser owning a gun increases a woman's risk of death by 500%. Oh, and while we tend to think of mass shootings as committed by random, violent strangers, over half of all mass shootings, defined, if you remember, as an incident where four or more people not the shooter are killed or injured, over half of all mass shootings are related to domestic violence. More than the risk of being randomly shot at a night club, I worry about being the unintended consequence of someone else's domestic dispute.

This violence not only frightens me, it angers me. It angers me because it's being done in our name, in the name of Christianity. The hateful, violent rhetoric the El Paso shooter spouted on the internet before his rampage, that rhetoric wasn't his alone. He may have been a lone wolf shooter, but his ideas weren't lone wolf ideas. They are very common views in what is known as Christian Identity. Christian Identity is a racist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist interpretation of Christianity, of our sacred texts, that asserts that white people are the true descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And how they get Germans and Norwegians from Middle Eastern genealogy is beyond me but the point is, this is being done in the name of our religious tradition. Now, the El Paso shooter is the far end of the violent extremism spectrum sure, but that rhetoric, that rhetoric is rampant in our cultural conversation and it has to stop. It has to stop and we have to speak out against it, because as despicable as these actions are, and as far removed as these beliefs seem from what we believe, the Christian Identity movement comes from our tradition, and like God with the rich man, we have to be the ones to step up and be our brothers' keepers.

So yeah, I'm afraid and I'm angry, and I'm sorry Jesus, but "do not be afraid, little flock," those words are not enough for me this morning. I don't want to be patronized, I don't want to be comforted or assuaged by empty promises, by thoughts and prayers that lead nowhere. I want, like John and James asked for a few chapters early, for fire to come down and consume those who wield power so viciously. Don't tell me Jesus, not to be afraid, unless you've got some actions to back it up.

Which is why verse thirty-two does not end, "do not be afraid, little flock," but Jesus goes on, "for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Let me say that again, "for it is YOUR FATHER'S good pleasure to GIVE you the kingdom." What that tells us is that the action part of this is on God. Yes, there are things we can do, and the verses preceding this are all about that, but at the end of the day, this is about God, about what God wants for us, about how God wants us to be able to live. I love the way Theologian Matthew Skinner from Luther Seminary described it. Dr. Skinner said, "the point isn't to coax a grumpy or frugal deity into being nice to us. Rather, God eagerly wants the "kingdom"... to take root in the real, lived experiences of Jesus's followers. Why? Because that's God's good pleasure." So it's not, do these things, including don't be afraid, so that God likes you; it's the reverse of that. It's God likes you, so you can do these things and not be afraid.

OK, God likes me, I'm not having to plead for God's favor. That's a start but it's still been a week, month, year, two decades since Columbine brought the possibility of massive acts of

violence to at least my collective memory, and God liking me, well, that's great but still not enough. So Jesus gives us this story about the watchful servants.

"Be dressed for action," Jesus said. Get your work clothes on, basically, "and have your lamps lit." It had never occurred to me, but I was reading this week about how much work the slaves in this story would have had to do in order to keep the lamps lit in wait for their master. I turn on a light and it stays on. But these were oil lamps. So they needed to have the oil refilled, the wicks trimmed, the whatever else you have to do with oil lamp. The point is the slaves weren't sitting around, lounging back on chairs, struggling to stay awake until the master returned so they could jump up and greet him at the door. They were working.

So what can we do? Well, I just learned of a document that the ELCA, our denomination, produced, called A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a Culture of Gun Violence. The document was written to start on June 16th, the day before the fourth anniversary of the shooting at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, but it can be used over any 60 day period. It's just what it sounds like, a resource of daily prayers, scripture, church teaching, and information to help us resensitize ourselves on the issues of gun violence, to learn what the facts are, what the church has done and is doing, where Christ through scripture is calling us, and to help us learn how we can actually take action. It's that action step that I found helpful. I can feel afraid and angry all day, but all that leaves me is feeling stuck. What I need is, to use the words of the Gospel reading today, some wicks to be trimming and some oil to be filling, so I don't feel powerless and I don't get

discouraged. I'm going to commit myself to reading it, one day at a time, clicking on the links, and educating myself as much as I can on this issue. Verse thirty-four of our Gospel said "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In our increasingly busy world, one of the greatest treasures I have is the treasure of my time. So if my heart is truly going to be with those who are suffering from the affects of the scourge of gun violence, the treasure of my time needs to be in learning about so that I can act on, this issue. I'll post a link to the document on the Trinity Facebook page and at the end of the sermon manuscript on our website. If you want to join me in this journey, I commit to starting Monday. I invite you.

The Gospel reading for this morning ends with this sort of strange message of foreboding, "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into." What I hear in this passage is the reality that we cannot protect ourselves from everything. Disasters occur, violence happens, the risk of being a person among people is real. As much as we want to, we cannot protect ourselves, our loved ones, our communities, from every possible risk or disaster. Nor, honestly, I think, would we want to. For the sort of isolation and control that would require is the opposite of the kind of freedom God has for us. There's a quote in my office from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you may remember, was a German Lutheran pastor who had been teaching at Union Seminary in New York City, but returned to Germany during World War Two to work against Hitler and the Nazi regime, a decision which ended in his death in a German concentration camp. Bonhoeffer said: "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture and can never be

safe. Peace is the opposite of security... Peace means giving oneself completely to God's commandment, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of the Almighty God."

So yes, it is chaotic and it is scary. But what this Gospel text tells us, what our faith tells us, is that God has us. Already, right now, forever, it is God's GOOD PLEASURE to care about us. And, because of that promise, because of the promise that we are already God's, we are not helpless and we are not hopeless. Violence, hatred, anger, fear, those are real things, and they are big things, but we are not powerless in the face of them. So stay alert, be dressed for action, do what you can do now to keep your lamps lit. Because thieves are not the only thing that come unexpectedly. We "also must be ready, for the Son of Man [also] is coming at an unexpected hour." Thanks be to God. Amen.

A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a Culture of Gun Violence:

ELCA website: <https://elca.org/60days>

Direct link to the PDF itself:

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/60DaysGunViolence.pdf?_ga=2.220511249.867975539.1565195244-1719456600.1496941453