

Gun Violence and Peacemaking

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“Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.” Psalm 51:14

“Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. . . . Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Isaiah 58: 1,12 (from the Lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday)

Where we serve as suburban pastors in Wilmington, Delaware, there are some people who breathe a sigh of relief, believing that “our safe streets don’t need any restoring” and that these biblical passages apply to other people, in other, “less fortunate” places. Even if that were the case, we would understand God’s call for us to preach for a better world for all people. The reality is that gun violence touches people connected to our church and our own family: A young man who once came to our church youth group moved to a neighboring city. He and a girlfriend started using drugs. During a drug buy, things went very wrong, and the young man and his girlfriend were both shot. She died from her wounds. His physical wounds healed, but his emotional ones will be with him for a long time to come.

One recent summer our daughter Sarah was volunteering with UrbanPromise, an amazing ecumenical ministry working with children and youth in Wilmington. On her first day, the young children on the playground explained to her, “Here, hide behind this car when the shooting starts.” Gun violence is a reality in their young lives. Weeks later, she and others riding in a van saw the body of a man who had been shot at a community soccer game.

Years ago, on Christmas Eve, the teenage daughter of one of Carolyn’s relatives was with some friends. Someone started playing with a gun there. It accidentally went off, shooting the teenager in our extended family. When she arrived in the emergency room, the nurse who first responded recognized the teenager as her own daughter. The young woman died.

One late afternoon in January just a couple of years ago, Carolyn was visiting a church family at their home in a troubled neighborhood. As she was leaving, she noticed a group of men gathered at a nearby intersection. When she arrived home, she heard the news that at that same intersection in Wilmington, only minutes after she had gone through it, the first murder in the new year had taken place.

A gifted teacher with great love for her students successfully dealt with personal depression using prescribed medications. When she and her husband decided to have children, she went off the drugs to avoid possible birth defects. Despite being under a psychiatrist’s care, her depression returned, and she killed herself using a gun that her husband had gotten to help her feel safe when she was home alone. Bruce ministered to her grieving husband and her parents who had lost their only child.

The Psalmist’s cry to be delivered from bloodshed can be heard in our homes,

workplaces, streets, and churches throughout the United States, where gun violence is taking thousands of lives. A few years ago, PBS commentator Mark Shields told *PBS News Hour* host Judy Woodruff, “You know, Judy, the reality is—and it’s a terrible reality—since Robert Kennedy died in the Ambassador Hotel on June 4, 1968, more Americans have died from gunfire than died in ... all the wars of this country’s history, from the Revolutionary through the Civil War, World War I, World War II, in those 43 years.... I mean, guns are a problem. And I think they still have to be confronted.” Like much of the information related to gun violence, this horrible number has been questioned by gun control opponents, but Shields’s horrifying statistic has been carefully documented as true by the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Politifact* web site.¹

Jesus’ seventh beatitude for peacemaking (Matthew 5:9) is a teaching that our nation needs to hear clearly, a calling for preachers to have a “voice like a trumpet.” Thomas G. Long, writing on the beatitude, says that the Church “sees what others do not see, that God is at work in this world even today and will surely bring all creation to a time of peace and rejoicing. This hoped-for time is the kingdom of heaven. For the world, the kingdom is a sure future; for the faithful, the kingdom is a present reality, giving strength and encouragement to its work.”²

Willard M. Swartley writes, “Add to these *peacemaking* beatitudes the seventh beatitude promise: “For they shall be called children of God.” As in Matt.5:45-48, peacemaking is rooted in God’s moral character. Children bear the image of the parent. Being children of peace is the gospel’s mark of identity for those who follow Jesus. Here is the charter for Christian vocation, to reflect the character of being God’s children. Jesus called disciples to be trained in this new radical thought and action. The Gospel narratives are Jesus’ catechism of the disciples.”³

In this Lenten season marked by calls for repentance, American churches need to confront the cost of gun violence. In this 50th anniversary year of the Presbyterians’ *The Confession of 1967*, it is good to recall this modern creed which states that “effective preaching, teaching, and personal witness require disciplined study of both the Bible and the contemporary world.”⁴ The following are some of the many excellent resources for preachers who want to do a careful study of biblical texts on peace and violence, along with many helpful writings examining gun violence today.

Peace by Walter Brueggemann, is an updated edition (2001) from his earlier classic book that is now published as part of *Understanding Biblical Themes Series* by Chalice Press; it carefully examines the scriptural vision of shalom, its implications of peace and justice for the church and individuals. The “Protecting Life” chapter in *Ten Commandments: Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture* by Patrick D. Miller thoughtfully looks at specific texts related to killing and protecting life. Miller includes the positive, Reformed perspective on the Decalogue with this quote from John Calvin that can be applied to advocating for individual practices and governmental policies that prevent gun violence:

Therefore in this commandment, “You shall not kill,” men’s common sense will see only that we must abstain from wronging anyone or desiring to do so. Besides this, it contains, I say, the requirement that we give our neighbor’s life all the help we can. To prove that I am not speaking unreasonably: God forbids us to hurt or harm a brother unjustly, because he

wills that the brother's life be dear and precious to us. So at the same time he requires those duties of love which can apply to its preservation. And thus we can see how the purpose of the commandment always discloses to us whatever it there enjoins us or forbids us to do. (*Institutes* 2.8.9)⁵

In the same *Interpretation* series is the recent book (2013) *Violence in Scripture* by Jerome F. D. Creach of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Creach examines troubling specific biblical passages on violence in the context of larger biblical teachings and makes a powerful case for both the Old and New Testament rejecting a reliance on violence. A fourth book by a top biblical scholar for any pastor's library is *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* by Willard M. Swartley (quoted above); it looks carefully at peace themes by each of the New Testament writers. All four of these books can help address issues of violence, peace, justice, and faithful discipleship throughout the year, which is a more effective approach than a one-time sermon on gun violence.

James E. Atwood became a leading advocate against gun violence after a friend, Herb Hunter, who was a charter member of a church where Atwood was then a pastor, was killed by a teen in a robbery at Hunter's hotel in 1975. For more than three decades, he has served as board member of the national Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. He worked as the Interfaith Coordinator of the Million Mom March, served as chair of Heeding God's Call chapter in Greater Washington, and is a National Committee member of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, which awarded him their "Peaceseeker of the Year" award in 2014. All of these experiences make Atwood's book, *America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé* (Cascade Books, 2012), the best book on faith and gun violence. Walter Brueggemann wrote the book's forward. Those wanting to encourage Christians to counter gun violence should not only read it and discuss it in group studies, but should also share it with family and friends, including by adding the book to church and public libraries (which can reach countless strangers with an important faith-based message, a subtle form of evangelism). *America and Its Guns* states:

Preventing gun violence is a spiritual mandate from God.

1. Each of us is created in the image of God.
2. Each of us is a child of God.
3. Each of us is a brother or sister in God's family.
4. Each of us is a neighbor whom we are commanded to love as we love ourselves.
5. The New Testament declares that our very bodies are "The temples of the Living God."
6. We cannot love our neighbor, brother/sister, without caring deeply about that which hurts or kills them.⁶

Furthermore Atwood says: "For too many, guns have become idols. They claim divine status; make promises of safety and security they cannot keep; transform people and neighborhoods; create enemies; and require human sacrifice."⁷ A former National Rifle Association Executive, Warren Cassidy, was serious when he said, "You would get a far better understanding of the NRA if you were approaching us as one of the

great religions of the world.”⁸ The National Council of Churches shares the concern for the connection between idolatry and our violent nation:

It is difficult to imagine that the One whose own Passion models the redemptive power of non-violence would look favorably on the violence of contemporary U.S. society. Present-day violence is made far worse than it otherwise would be by the prevalence of weapons on our streets. This stream of the Christian tradition insists that it is idolatry to trust in guns to make us secure, since that usually leads to mutual escalation while distracting us from the One whose love alone gives us security.... Christians can certainly contend that it is necessary for public authorities to take up arms in order to protect citizens from violence; but to allow assault weapons in the hands of the general public can scarcely be justified on Christian grounds. The stark reality is that such weapons end up taking more lives than they defend, and the reckless sale or use of these weapons refutes the gospel’s prohibition against violence.⁹

“The disciplined study of the contemporary world” shows this ecumenical statement to be true, including that “weapons end up taking more lives than they defend.” A recent scientific meta-study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* concerned about guns in homes as a public health issue found:

- Firearms cause an estimated 31,000 deaths annually in the United States (33,000 in the last two years)... Data from the 16-state National Violent Death Reporting System indicate that 51.8% of deaths from suicide in 2009 ($n = 9949$) were firearm-related; among homicide victims ($n = 4057$), 66.5% were firearm-related. Most suicides (76.4%) occurred in the victims’ homes.
- Homicides also frequently occurred in the home, with 45.5% of male victims and 74.0% of female victims killed at home.
- Firearm ownership is more prevalent in the United States than in any other country; approximately 35% to 39% of households have firearms and 22% of persons report owning firearms.
- The annual rate of suicide by firearms (6.3 suicides per 100,000 residents) is higher in the United States than in any other country with reported data, and the annual rate of firearm-related homicide in the United States (7.1 homicides per 100,000 residents) is the highest among high-income countries.
- Results from ecological studies suggest that state restrictions on firearm ownership are associated with decreases in firearm-related suicides and homicides.¹⁰

America Under Fire: An Analysis of Gun Violence in the United States and the Link to Weak Gun Laws is an updated study (October 2016) by the Center for American Progress that assessed the correlation between the relative strength or weakness of a state’s gun laws as measured by the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence and rates of gun violence in the state using ten categories of gun violence or gun-related crimes. The free, downloadable 46-page study found that “the 10 states with the weakest gun laws collectively have an aggregate level of gun violence that is 3.2 times higher than the 10 states with the strongest gun laws.”¹¹

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has been a leading denomination in developing resources for congregational study and worship seeking to combine biblical-theologi-

cal teachings with studies on gun violence. *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call* is an excellent study paper (written by a task force that included pastors, a Virginia Tech campus minister, a former police officer, a former rancher and two professors) approved by the Presbyterians' 219th General Assembly (2010).¹² The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship developed *Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit* that includes a Bible study, conversation starters for group discussions, worship resources, and advocacy ideas.¹³ Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, often associated with dealing with natural disaster or helping war refugees, funded a DVD documentary for congregational study and action titled *Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence*.¹⁴

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence (<http://faithsunitied.org>) is an interfaith coalition started after the 2011 Tucson shooting that killed six people and injured US Representative Gabrielle Giffords. Faiths United works with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (<http://www.bradiycampaign.org>) and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (<http://csgv.org>). They have done a free resource (updated December 2015) for church leaders titled *Gun Violence Prevention Laws Save Lives: Conversing with Your Congregation about Gun Violence* with sections including the introduction by the Very Rev. Gary Hall, Dean of the Washington National Cathedral; the theological basis for gun violence prevention; evidence showing that background checks and handgun purchaser licensing are saving lives; responses to common pro-gun arguments; and guidance on what a congregation can and cannot do under IRS tax status.¹⁵ Faiths United promotes national events that can be celebrated locally like "Wear Orange: National Gun Violence Awareness Day" (June 2); "A Concert Across America to End Gun Violence" (September 2016); and Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend (December 14-16, 2016).

Pastor Richard G. Watts once wrote a wonderful article called "How to Preach Peace (Without Being Tuned Out)." The article is still relevant today in preaching about controversial issues (including gun violence), and it includes twelve points to consider when preaching:

1. Remember that you are an interpreter of God's Word—not a professor of political science, an arms inspector, or a news anchor. Our roots lie in the Bible.
2. Preach out of Vision, not demand.
3. Let your manner itself be peaceable... Nobody in the pew takes kindly to angry lectures.
4. Be careful and honest in doing your homework.
5. Tangibilitate! Talking about peace often involves numbers that boggle the mind and images that are difficult to grasp. We need to work hard to translate into forceful images.
6. Let prophetic preaching be, at the same time, pastoral.... The prophetic sermon is a pastoral sermon. It requires caring and sensitivity.
7. Speak confessionally.... Preach out of personal feeling, reflection, journeying. Use "I-messages" rather than "You-messages."
8. Encourage dialogue.... A lot of resistance to prophetic preaching is just anger or frustration about its monologic form. To preach about Jesus' call to peacemaking without allowing others to reflect aloud on what that

call means to them is not fair and will not work. So try to make room for shared sermon preparation, talkbacks (and even back-talk!), debates and panels, and a deepening sense that “differences of opinion are normal in our church.”

9. Suggest something—however modest—that we can do.

10. Beware of the “hit-and-run” sermon!

11. Expect the Holy Spirit to work a mighty response.”

12. [The twelfth point in this article is a good example of how this kind of preaching can be done.]¹⁶

Gun violence cannot be separated from related issues of criminal justice, racial justice, poverty, sexual abuse, mental illness, and violence throughout the culture. Preachers will find the print editions and web sites with blogs of *Christian Century* and *Sojourners* to have helpful current reporting on gun violence and all these related issues from faith perspectives. *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* magazines (print and web sites) often bring moral perspectives to their frequent stories on gun violence. The Trace (<https://www.thetrace.org>) “is an independent, nonprofit news organization dedicated to expanding coverage of guns in the United States. We believe that our country’s epidemic rates of firearm-related violence are coupled with a second problem: a shortage of information about the issue at large.”

Prayer, spoken or sung, can make a real difference. Patrick D. Miller Jr. writes, “In a world that assumes...that things have to be the way they are and that we must not assume too much about improving them, the doxologies of God’s people are fundamental indicators that wonders have not ceased, that possibilities not yet dreamt of will happen, and that hope is an authentic stance.”¹⁷

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has written over 300 hymns, including several involving gun violence—after the shootings at Columbine High School massacre—for the United Nations’ International Day of Peace with a special emphasis on gun violence, when George Zimmerman was acquitted for killing Trayvon Martin, after the shooting of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, after the mass killing at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and after the killings of Black men and five police officers in Dallas.

In October 2015, we attended a church conference in Portland, Oregon. Days before there was a mass shooting at Umpqua Community College near Roseburg, Oregon. A 26-year-old student there had fatally shot an assistant professor along with eight students in a classroom; nine others were injured before the wounded shooter killed himself. This was the deadliest mass shooting in Oregon’s modern history. Carolyn wrote the following hymn while we were in Oregon. In the last full decade, “between 2,000 and 2010, a total of 335,609 people died from guns—more than the population of St. Louis, Mo. (318,069), Pittsburgh (307,484), Cincinnati, Ohio (296,223), Newark, N.J. (277,540), and Orlando, Fla. (243,195) (sources: CDF, US Census; CDC).”¹⁸ This hymn was sung the following month at the Washington National Cathedral and featured in a Religion News Service article published by *Christian Century*.¹⁹

335,609 (“I Cried to God”)

FINLANDIA 11.10.11.10.11.10 (“Be Still, My Soul”)

I cried to God, “Three hundred thirty thousand!”
Five thousand more, six hundred more, and nine!”
In just ten years, a truth we can’t imagine:
All died from guns, one loved one at a time!
And then I heard... “Whom shall I send to grieve them?
Go tell the world: “I love them! They are mine!”

I asked the Lord, “Why is there so much violence?
If you are God, why don’t you stop the pain?
God, won’t you speak? For all around is madness!
Just say the word and make us whole again!”
And then I heard... “Whom shall I send as prophets?
Speak out my truth! Shout till the killings end!”

I knelt and prayed, and wept for all the fallen;
So many lives, so many dreams now gone.
More than a name— each one was someone’s cousin,
Or someone’s child, or someone counted on.
And then I heard... “Whom shall I send, who knew them,
To work for peace, to labor till the dawn?

Lord, here am I! And here we are, together!
No one alone can end this killing spree.
The powers of death pit one against another,
Yet you are God and you desire peace.
As mourners, prophets, laborers together,
Give us the strength to make the killings cease.

Tune: Jean Sibelius, 1899 (“Be Still, My Soul”).

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New Hymns: www.carolynshymns.com Email: bcgillette@comcast.net

Permission is given for free use of this hymn for local church use and by ecumenical groups
by those supporting efforts to end gun violence.

Notes

1 Jacobson, Louis, “PBS Commentator Mark Shields Says More Killed by Guns since ‘68 than in All U.S. Wars,” @politifact. January 18, 2013, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2013/jan/18/mark-shields/pbs-commentator-mark-shields-says-more-killed-guns/>.

2 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 47-48.

3 Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 56-57.

4 “The Confession of 1967,” *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part 1: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 295, 9.49.

5 Patrick D. Miller, *Ten Commandments: Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2009), 264.

6 *Gun Violence Prevention Laws Save Lives: Conversing with Your Congregation about Gun Violence*, Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, p. 9, <http://www.decembersabbath.org/wp-content/up->

loads/2015/12/GVP-Faith-Leader-Guide-2015, pdf.

7 “Jim Atwood Selected as 2014 Peaceseeker,” Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, November 13, 2013, <http://presbypeacefellowship.org/content/jim-atwood-selected-2014-peaceseeker#.WAJ4JzKZPEY>.

8 James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 19-20.

9 “Ending Gun Violence: A Resolution and Call to Action by the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S.A.,” Adopted by the Governing Board, May 17, 2010, <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/2010/gun-violence.php>.

10 Andrew Anglemeyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, “The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis,” 2014, 160(2): 101-110, doi:10.7326/M131301. <http://annals.org/article.aspx?articleid=1814426>.

11 *America Under Fire: An Analysis of Gun Violence in the United States and the Link to Weak Gun Laws* is updated study (October 2016) by the Center for American Progress, p. 3, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/11100940/AmericaUnderFire-report.pdf>.

12 *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call*, PCUSA 219th General Assembly (2010), https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf.

13 *Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit*, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/peacemaking/pdf/gvp_toolkit.pdf.

14 Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, *Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence*, <https://pda.pcusa.org/pda/resource/dvd-trigger/>.

15 *Gun Violence Prevention Laws Save Lives: Conversing with Your Congregation about Gun Violence*, Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, <http://www.decembersabbath.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/GVP-Faith-Leader-Guide-2015.pdf>.

16 Richard G. Watts, Richard, “How to Preach Peace (Without Being Tuned Out),” *The Pastor’s Letter*, Volume 2, Number 10, October 1981, revised by the Rev. W. Mark Koenig, June 2009 for PCUSA web site. Available from Mark.Koenig@pcusa.org.

17 Patrick D. Miller, “In Praise and Thanksgiving,” *Theology Today*, 45.2 (1988), page 180.

18 @NBCNews. “Just the Facts: Gun Violence in America.” U.S. News. http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/01/16/16547690-just-the-facts-gun-violence-in-america?lite.

19 Adele M. Banks, “Carolyn Winfrey Gillette Pens Verses on Gun Violence to Church Hymn Tunes,” *The Christian Century*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-12/pastor-pens-verses-gun-violence-sung-tune-church-hymns>.