

## **Fired Up**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
in Fremont, California,  
on August 18, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.  
Scripture: Jeremiah 23:23-29 and Luke 12:49-56  
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Columbine, Colorado. Newtown, Connecticut. Sutherland Springs, Texas. Towns most of us had never heard of, until heart-wrenching mass shootings at a high school, an elementary school, and a church made them national household names.

Las Vegas, Nevada. Orlando, Florida. Cities we associated with vacations and fun, until the two worst mass shootings in our country indelibly changed the way we remember these places.

Gilroy, California. El Paso Texas. Dayton, Ohio. Three of the latest high-profile mass shootings in our country this month, which have changed the way we will remember these cities.

And I could go on. I could name places like Parkland, Florida, and Thousand Oaks, California, and Aurora, Colorado, places we now know because of the dozens who have lost their lives to gun violence in those places.

But I could also name Chicago, Illinois and Greenwood, Mississippi, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Tacoma Washington, and Saint Louis, Missouri—all places where people have been killed and injured in a mass shooting in the 15 days since the Dayton massacre, if I use the definition that the Gun Violence Archive uses, which is a gun incident in which at least four people besides the shooter are injured or killed. Using that definition, there have been 262 mass shootings in 2019, and this is only the 230<sup>th</sup> day of the year. That's more than one mass shooting per day in our country.

And the deaths in mass shootings, though they are horrific and make national news, are but a small fraction—about only 2 percent—of all gun deaths in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 39,773 people died from gun-related injuries in the United States in 2017, which is the most recent year for which complete data is available.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-seven percent of those deaths were murders. Sixty percent were suicides.

We have a crisis of gun violence in this country, which is brought into focus every time a mass shooting hits the front pages of the news. And there is no simple solution to the problem because there are so many cultural issues that feed into the problem of gun violence. There is the issue of domestic violence. There is the issue of inadequate and inconsistent system of background check laws. There is the issue of our culture of toxic masculinity. There is the issue of fear and anxiety in many people as our country—indeed the entire world—becomes more multicultural. There is our tendency to fear the “other” and blame them for our problems. There are issues of income inequality and racism and misogyny. There is the issue of our country's idolization of the second

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<sup>1</sup> John Gramlich, “What the Data Says About Gun Deaths in the U.S.,” *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, the Pew Research Center, August 16, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/> Accessed August 17, 2019.

amendment of its constitution. And there is the issue of the federal government refusing to understand gun violence as a public health crisis and create funding to study it as such.

And my fear in this latest round of deaths—and I know it is many of yours as well—is that we will cry out, and talk, and argue, and plead, and nothing will change. We will confront, again, the deep conflict and division in our country over guns, and we will again retreat into our separate corners, and do nothing.

If we wanted a word of hope and comfort from Jesus about conflict and division this week, we sure didn't get it. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Jesus asks? "No, I tell you, but rather division!"<sup>2</sup> This is a particularly challenging and difficult text to read at any time, but more so especially now, at a time when our nation is more divided than ever over the issues that matter most to us. It's the kind of text that we would rather skim over on our way to one more uplifting. We would rather not hear from the fired up, angry Jesus, but the kind and compassionate Jesus. Isn't that nice parable about the Prodigal Son coming up here soon?

But if we think about it, this fired up, angry Jesus is speaking right into the heart of things, isn't he? Because the truth is, when you do the work of bringing about the Kin-dom of God, which is what Jesus asks us to do, you're doing the work of upending the status quo. When you do Kin-dom work, the work of peace, you have to address the underlying injustices in society, and the underlying and unacknowledged racism and hate and fear that's lurking in people's hearts. And no one is going to thank you for that. No one is going to say, "Oh, thank you for telling us this, we'll be glad to change." Instead, there will be push-back, and counter-attack, and division.<sup>3</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is much revered now, but those of you who have lived long enough to remember his ministry will remember that he was not universally celebrated when he was alive. He was considered many to be an agitator. He was accused of being a communist. He was criticized for pushing for change too hard and too fast. He was one of the most hated men in America.<sup>4</sup> When Rev. King called out the underlying injustices in society, and the underlying and unacknowledged racism and hate and fear that's lurking in people's hearts, no one said, "Oh, thank you for telling us this, we'll be glad to change." Instead, there was push-back, and counter-attack, and division.

So Jesus tells his disciples—and us—that the coming of the Prince of Peace is not going to make everything nice with rainbows and unicorns right away. Instead, before there is peace, there is going to be trouble. And the trouble is going to be in the family, between parents and children. He's definitely not referring to separating parents and children at the border here, but about the inevitable conflict between the younger generation and the older generation, between the new way of the Kin-dom, and the old way of the Empire. The people who are used to the old way, the status quo, are going to dig in their heels and push back.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:51 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, "Not Peace But Division," MinistryMatters.com, August 14, 2019.  
<https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9757/not-peace-but-division> Accessed August 14, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

I had such trouble with this idea that Jesus espouses, this idea that the older generation will be pitted against the younger. But then I remembered that the Jesus movement was, essentially, a youth movement. Tradition tells us that Jesus was in his early thirties during his ministry. He called young disciples who left their family businesses to follow him.

Recall again Dr. King. He first came to national attention as the leader of the Birmingham Bus Boycott in 1955—when he was 26 years old. When he led the March on Washington and gave his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” in 1963, he was 34. When he was assassinated in 1968, he was 38. The civil rights movement was multi-generational, yes, but it had as its leader a young man, and it was supported by youth movements, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Think about the social movements of our time that are fighting against injustice and oppression today. Occupy Wall Street, fighting the injustice of income inequality, was primarily a youth movement. Black Lives Matter, fighting against the injustice of violence and racism, was founded by three young women in their thirties. The protest against the Dakota XL pipeline at Standing Rock was initiated by a 13-year-old. And in the wake of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the student survivors sparked an uprising against the injustice of gun violence with a fiery movement that went national, with students staging school walkouts and “die-ins” across the nation. And they all faced incredible push-back from those whose power was wrapped up in preserving the status quo.

“From now on five in one household will be divided,” Jesus says, “three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son  
and son against father,  
mother against daughter  
and daughter against mother.”<sup>6</sup>

“When Jesus came, he was not a pacifier. He was not a law and order dominator. [...] He was an agitator. He was a fire-starter. He knew that things had to heat up before people would wake up. He knew that as the Prince of Peace, you can’t produce and bring real peace without bringing justice. And justice is about power. And so far in human history there aren’t many people besides Jesus who have given up power willingly. And so confrontation comes. Things heat up. It was true in Jesus’s day, and it’s true in our day.”<sup>7</sup>

The problem is, we in North America—especially we North American Christians—hate conflict. We despise division. And so rather than recognizing conflict and division as an opportunity to effect change, we employ our “well-worn arsenal of avoidance strategies [...] to conceal and contain conflict”<sup>8</sup> and return to the status quo.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 12:52-53 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Brian McLaren, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Michal Chan, “Jesus’ Ministry of Fire” WorkingPreacher.org, August 11, 2019.  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5370> Accessed August 14, 2019.

But there can be a gift in conflict. Because when conflict reaches “a boiling point, the invisible social buffers melt away and one is left staring at a gaping chasm. And echoing off the walls of that chasm are the voices of our wounded communities.”<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to run from that moment, to shut our eyes to the horror and our ears to the voices of the wounded, or to trowel over the moment with our “thoughts and prayers.” But if we can be brave and stand in that chasm, if we can stand with Jesus and do the work of Jesus, we can find our way through the chasm of conflict to healing and reconciliation, and we can experience the old way, the status quo, the way of the Empire fall away and experience the new way, the way of the Kin-dom take its place. It won’t be easy. But Jesus has promised that we won’t be alone. Amen.

A practice to help us move from “thoughts and prayers,” through conflict, to action:

***Remember who you are.*** You are made in the image and likeness of God. As a follower of Jesus, you bring love and light into the world. As a partner with the Holy Spirit, you co-create miracles through willingness and faith.

*From this space, **forgive the shooters**, the factors that led to their violent deeds, and the paralysis of the nation. If you can’t do that, imagine God’s unconditional love and Jesus’ forgiveness for them even in the midst of the evil. If you can’t do that, at least ask God to help you set those feelings aside temporarily. Why? If you meet their anger, hostility, loathing and fear with your own, then the atmosphere of us vs. them has simply increased. Love and light cannot win in that environment. And love and light must win.*

*Next, **lift up your thoughts and prayers in a brand-new way.** Turn your thoughts to the commitments you have made as a follower of Jesus: the commitment to actively resist evil, injustice and oppression, to love God, neighbor, and self. Pray on those words. Gently turn aside the thoughts that say you can’t make a difference. Pray regularly, and pair it with reading Matthew 17:20 and John 14:13.*

*After this, **redirect your attention from the trauma at hand to an expansive vision of the Kin-dom.** What would a community look like in which the thought of shooting others wouldn’t even occur for people? In which a violent fear of the other couldn’t take root? Envisioning this will take holy imagination, creative conversation, and much prompting of the Holy Spirit. Allow the Spirit to take you there.*

***Ask God what action—or actions—you can take toward that vision.*** Be aware that this will require more than one person or a few people to accomplish. And likely more courage than you currently have. Be brave. Be faithful. Trust that God trusts you to do this.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from: Rebecca Simon-Peter, “Beyond Thoughts and Prayers,” MinistryMatters.Com, August 14, 2019. <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9758/beyond-thoughts-and-prayers> Accessed August 14, 2019.