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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 29, 2022

7 Easter, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 16:16-34](#)

[Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21](#)

[John 17:20-26](#)

[Psalm 97](#)

In the name of Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end: Amen.

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My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing,
It finds an echo in my soul: how can I keep from singing?

I'm reminded of that old hymn by our reading from Acts. They're in prison, Paul and Silas, their feet fastened tightly in stocks. They've just been tortured, stripped and beaten severely in the middle of the public marketplace. It's midnight. And somehow, in spite of it all, their response is to sing.

There's a lot to keep them from singing. But they sing because they know a love that sustains them through the pain. A love that is stronger than prison and torture.

A love that's big enough even to invite their jailer into. A love that is stronger than death itself.

There's a lot to keep us from singing too. We live in a time that's in some ways very different from theirs and in some ways not so different at all. Like Paul and Silas, we live in a society that's addicted to violence. Ours takes the form not of public floggings and crucifixions and gladiatorial combat, but largely of people shooting one another with guns. Sometimes in the horrific violence of public shootings like those we've seen in Buffalo and Uvalde in the past two weeks. More often in ones and twos at a time, in homicides that don't make the front page, in interpersonal violence and domestic violence, and also in deaths by suicide. By sheer numbers those deaths dwarf the number that happen in mass events. Yet the sheer horror of what happens when a human being decides to commit a random act of satanic evil with a weapon of war shakes us to the core in a unique way. We grieve, and we're afraid, and we're outraged.

There's a lot about violence in the Bible. There's plenty about swords, like the one the jailer carries in our Acts reading today. There's the great passage from Isaiah, "Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." There's Jesus telling his followers "Put away your sword, for those who live by the sword will die by the sword." But scripture doesn't tell us anything about guns any more than it does about airplanes or germ theory or the internet.

So we who have come to believe in our own day, we whom Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper, have to make decisions based on principles scripture does give us, and based on the consciences and minds God has given us to follow the Spirit's leadings in the time we do live in.

I don't like guns very much. I'm not a gun owner and don't much feel the attraction to them. I also know that there are three hundred million guns in this country that aren't going to vanish, and that about a third of all adults in this country do own guns, and that we're not going to solve our country's problem with gun violence without talking to one another and figuring out some ways we can agree on that will reduce harm and save lives. That's not easy partly because there are those who profit from our gridlock. Our story from Acts tells about the owners of the slave girl who see, after Paul has healed her, that their income is threatened, and who then go and mobilize the political system to try to protect it. That too has resonances in our own time. There are those who would rather keep us polarized and paralyzed, so we don't make any changes, who like it when people like me talk about taking all guns away so gun owners will go and buy more guns and stand up even harder against any regulations whatsoever. But what if we could start with facts and see where we get?

One fact is that this country has more guns per capita, and more guns period, than any other place on earth. It's not even close. American civilians own more guns than the next 25 countries combined. Yemen, a country in the middle of a brutal civil war, has 52 guns for every hundred people. We have 120. This is the only place in the world with more guns than people. In terms of other countries as wealthy as the United States, the next highest is Canada with 34, and it goes down from there.¹ Now if we were talking about alcohol, you don't have to be any kind of prohibitionist to be concerned if a country's citizens were knocking back on average a bottle of wine a night. It's fair to say this country is addicted to guns. And that addiction has consequences. We have 3.8 gun murders per 100,000 people. Canada has 0.4, Denmark less than 0.2.²

¹ *Small Arms Survey*, 2017.

² Nurith Aizenman, "Gun Violence: How the U.S. Compares with Other Countries," *Goats and Soda* from NPR (October 6, 2017); <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/10/06/555861898/gun-violence-how-the-u-s-compares-to-other-countries>.

The human heart is not that different among those countries. The ratio of troubled young men is not that different among those countries. The saturation of lethal weapons and the ease of getting them for anyone is. And the difference manifests in lives destroyed.

Now it's also true that we have cultural differences between this country and some others. One of our issues is our national addiction to a kind of fantasy of power and domination, expressed in violence, a fantasy with deep roots in the legacy of European settlers pushing into native land, a fantasy of self-sufficiency through outgunning the competition. It's a fantasy that manifests in vigilantism against young black and brown men. It's a hypermasculine fantasy where Bushmaster rifles, the kind of rifle used in the Sandy Hook shootings, are advertised with the slogan, "Consider your man card reissued." And it's a fantasy that trades on images of patriarchal religion. Just days before the Texas shooting Daniel Defense, the manufacturer of the rifle used there, tweeted an ad with a picture of a toddler holding an assault rifle with the Bible verse "Train up a child in the way he should go."

In this fallen world, this side of God's kingdom, there may be reasons why deadly weapons exist. But we should never fall in love with them or glorify them. And the kind of pornographic, compensatory, militaristic rhetoric that is used to glorify guns in our society is a manifestation of a deep sickness of the soul.

We're not going to change the human heart overnight, and we're not going to cure our society's addiction to violence overnight. But if our goal is a little more modest, if our goal is saving lives and making people safer, there are some common-sense things we can do.

This church's General Convention has passed resolutions in favor of requiring universal background checks, permits, and safety training for anyone who purchases a firearm. In favor of safe-storage laws. And in favor of red-flag laws that take guns away from people who are threats to themselves or others. Many of these proposals aren't dramatic. They won't bring in the kingdom of God. But they would make it harder for what happened in Buffalo and Uvalde to happen. They would lower the odds and put obstacles in the way. They would save lives.

If you are a gun owner, we need you now. If you are a person of honor and you have made the choice to own a deadly weapon for reasons of hunting or sports or self-defense, then you know just how important it is that outside those very specific scenarios that weapon is never, ever used and that those who don't have the capacity to act with that same duty and responsibility never hold it in their hands. It's especially important when people on the right side of the political spectrum work on these issues—because that's where the political will is that can change things, and because political conservatism at its best values duty and honor. The veterans we commemorate this Memorial Day weekend who gave their lives in this nation's wars knew that liberties and rights also carry responsibilities. Our political gridlock is based on partisanship. But our faith is not partisan, it is sacred, and we hold every human being to be created in the sacred image of the living God. So let us figure out what sane and common-sense steps we can agree on and let us save some lives.

We live in troubling times. So did Paul and Silas. So has every generation of believers that Jesus prayed for on the night of the Last Supper. But we put our trust in the love that commands both heaven and earth, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Let us pray, and act, and let our prayer be action, and our action be prayer.