

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent, 2018
The Rev. Kerith Harding, St. John's Episcopal Church, Maui
Gun Violence and Redeeming Loss

It was January of 2012, and I had gone through enough ultrasounds in my life to have a theory. If the ultrasound technician is friendly and talkative and answers questions about what is on the screen, then you're in good shape. BUT, if they're quiet and tell you that only the doctor is allowed to interpret the results, then bad news awaits.

Our technician left the room, saying that the doctor would be right with us. To our untrained eyes, it looked like a normal baby on the screen. I told Ali of my concern that the technician had simply clicked the mouse too many times; taken too many pictures.

Moments later, the doctor came in.

She didn't even introduce herself.

She just said, "*There's something very wrong with your baby.*"

If you know us, then you know how this story ends, because you know we are not the parents of a 5 year old girl. We had her remains cremated, and we named her Katherine Grace. We buried her with my grandparents and uncle in our family plot in upstate New York.

I think of Katherine Grace often. Not as frequently as I used to, but maybe a few times over the course of a regular week. I think of her every time I see my cousin's daughter, Shea, since their due dates were just a few days apart and I suspect they'd be good friends.

I wonder what she'd be like. I wonder how she'd be doing in Kindergarten. And, of course, I assume she'd be the smartest, kindest, most charming, most athletic, most charismatic child in her class.

Weeks like this week are different though... I think of Katherine constantly. And, I do so, as I think of the 17 sets of parents in Florida who have just joined the club that no parent ever wants to join. The club I know some of you are members of, too. Parents of dead children.

I think of how our experiences are different...
That they knew their children.
Surely, that must be much more difficult than what I've been through...
That they know how their children did in kindergarten,
and that their kids actually were the smartest, kindest, most charming,
most athletic, most charismatic kids in their classes.

And, I think of what we have in common.
The dreams that evaporated before our eyes of graduations, weddings,
and all of life's generic ups and downs.
The questions we ask ourselves, "Could I have done anything different?
Could I have done anything to protect her?" And, the "what if's."
"What if we hadn't gone to this particular place at this time?
What if we'd just locked ourselves inside and eaten organic food...
Would something be different?
Would she still be alive?"

These are the sorts of questions you ask when you've lost a child.
They are questions that are rarely answerable.
The fact is, God never promises us a rose garden in life, but as
Christians, if we believe in anything, we believe in redemption, and so I
ask myself, "What can I do to redeem this loss?"

You've probably seen other friends try to do this. Frequently, parents
will start a scholarship fund in their child's name in order to help others
who are passionate about something their child was passionate about.
It's a noble endeavor, and I think, for some, it helps bring some small
good out of their loss. Over the years, Katherine's loss has been
redeemed for me in a number of ways, most frequently when I have the
opportunity to be there when a friend or parishioner loses their own
child. In fact, just two month's after Katherine's death I was asked to go
to the hospital to baptize a baby who was still-born a few months before
her due date. Before Katherine's death I might have thought, "Wait a
second, it doesn't make any sense theologically to baptize a dead baby."

But after.... You better believe, there was nothing that was going to keep me from placing my hands on that tiny little girl and naming her as God's beloved.

There are lots of ways to redeem loss.

But I do think that there is ONE that is better than all the rest.

The ONE, BEST way to redeem a loss is to make sure that no one ever has to suffer such a loss again.

We don't have that option with Katherine, because we don't know what caused her rare condition, but we DO have that with the 17 people who were shot and killed at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School this week.

We do have that with the two 15 year olds who were shot and killed and 18 injured at Marshall County High School in Kentucky last month.

With the student who was shot and killed at Wake Forest a few days before.

With the three people killed at Aztec High School in December.

With the elementary schooler and 5 others shot and killed in Rancho Tahama in November.

With the 27 people shot at Sutherland Springs Church that same month.

And, with the 59 people shot and killed in Las Vegas in October.

If your counting, that's 112 people shot and killed since October, and that list, isn't comprehensive, it's just the ones I happened to hear about. That's more than 200 parents whose children – young and old - are dead.

The doctor's words ring in my head, "*There is something very wrong with your baby.*"

For us now, the verdict is, "There is something very wrong with ***our country.***"

“Americans make up about 4.4% of the global population but own 42 percent of the world’s guns. From 1966 to 2012, 31 percent of the gunmen in mass shootings worldwide were American” according to a study out of the University of Alabama.¹ “Adjusting for population, only Yemen has a higher rate of mass shootings among countries with more than 10 million people.”² And they have the 2nd highest rate of gun ownership after the U.S.

The correlation is clear.

How much more blood has to be shed before we are pouring out into the streets, flooding our elected officials offices with phone calls, and saying, “We aren’t going to tolerate this any more.”

And if we aren’t doing something about it, frankly, we are part of the problem. The society whose currency reads “In God we trust” is beginning to look like one that boasts, “In guns we trust.” Ministers in evangelical churches will raise money and campaign loudly to protect the lives of the unborn, but won’t make a peep when it comes to protecting the LIVING from violence.³

None of this is new, of course.

Shortly after the killing of four African American girls, and the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote about the culture of violence in our country, and our own complicity with it. He writes, “*So in a sense we are all participants in that horrible act that tarnished the image of our nation. By our silence, by our willingness to compromise principle, by our constant attempt to cure the cancer of racial injustice with the Vaseline of gradualism, by our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim, by allowing our movie and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one*

¹ Article from the NYTimes “What explains U.S. Mass Shootings? International Comparisons Suggest an Answer.” By Mark Fisher and Josh Keller, November 7, 2017.

² Fisher and Kelly (same as above)

³ The thoughts expressed in this paragraph were inspired by the Rev. Joe Kay’s article found at <https://sojo.net/articles/whens-last-time-you-heard-sermon-about-gun-violence>

*who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing, by allowing all these developments, we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes.”*⁴

Lent is a time when we walk Jesus' final days with him.

We remember that Jesus, too, was raised in a violent culture.

A culture, which while it did not have guns, had brutal punishments by stoning and crucifixion as commonplace. And, what did Jesus do?

He told the crowds to “drop their stones, put away their swords.”⁵

I hope you are all wondering what more you can do.

And, as you might guess, I have a few ideas:

1. If you own a gun, think differently about it. Would you be willing to give that gun up in order to save a life? If so, then do so and don't be quiet about it. Tell your friends and family. I have. And, I'm from Texas, so that's saying something. My DNA is probably half made up of duck liver pate and years worth of frozen caribou meat, but frankly, if I'm not hunting to feed my family, I don't need a gun.

2. I think some things *are being* and *will be* asked of us soon, like attending a march or writing to our senator. If these things are not “your thing,” do them anyway. Set aside Lent as the season where you choose nonviolence and peace, and put yourself into new, uncomfortable space in order to achieve it. Set aside Lent to not be sidelines kind of person. Jesus, whom we endeavor to emulate, was not a sidelines kind of person. So, no matter how hard it may be for you, this Lent, do something. At least one thing.

⁴ https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230019/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/autobiography/chp_21.htm

⁵ From the Rev. Joe Kay's article found at <https://sojo.net/articles/whens-last-time-you-heard-sermon-about-gun-violence>

3. Finally, “thoughts and prayers” are getting a bad rap these days because it is a phrase our NRA/gun-lobby supported politicians are hiding behind. They think it is all that’s expected of them, but I am willing to say that – and listen closely to this because I want you to share this with others –

if our elected leadership genuinely engaged God in prayer they would not emerge from the experience unchanged.

If they were *really* praying, they’d know they have to do something.

Those of us gathered here know that prayer is powerful when it is genuine and heartfelt,
when it is not a platitude we are hiding behind,
when we enter into it knowing that prayer alone will likely not change the world, but it will likely change us,
it changes people’s hearts and minds.
And that’s how change happens.
It starts small, like a mustard seed, and soon it is moving mountains.

So this Lent, among every other justice issue we will reflect upon,
every other social and personal sin we seek to change,
let us keep front and center our nation’s terrible situation with gun laws,
and let us set aside this Lent — Lent 2018 — to do something we may not want to do in order for our voices to be heard and lives to be saved.
Amen.