

## DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER!

*Scripture:*

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-18**

Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

<sup>18</sup>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.

**Philippians 3:4b-3:8**

Paul is speaking to the people forming the Christian church in Phillip.

He is telling them about his past in a personal testimony.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

**This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



(Bell tolls 7 times)

The bell just tolled 7 times. That might be confusing because all week we have been mourning the loss of the 58 who died in the Las Vegas shooting last Sunday night. The bell toll here this morning

was in remembrance of them, but I asked Althea to toll it 7 times in remembrance for the 7 other deaths that will happen today. For the 7 children **under the age of 18** who **will die today, across the United States** in every day gun violence. (Please take a pen or pencil. When I say a number, write it down on the bulletin cover.)

7 children will die today in this country. 7 more will die tomorrow. 70 children and teens under the age of 18

will die from gunshot wounds in the next 10 days in our country. 70. This is a huge epidemic! Las Vegas was a huge tragedy. But it is also a reminder of the pain 7 families feel daily when they lose their children to gunfire.

If this loss of life daily was due to a virus like the ebola virus, there would be a huge coordinated effort by our government to put a stop to the daily loss of life.

Can you believe it?

7 is the average number **of children** (people under the age of 18) who will die today from gun deaths. In the next 10 days, all together, adults and children, 930 people, will die at the hand of a gun.

Every day, 315 people in our country are shot by guns. 93 of those are mortally wounded. Every day, not just last Sunday night. This is the world we live in. We (in the U.S.) have it worse than Syria.

On average, 30 people are killed in Syria every day. 30 daily in Syria where a war is being waged compared to 93 deaths a day in our country where a silent war is being waged, against ourselves.

Some of the teens will die today because they broke up with their girlfriends and impulsively grabbed their Dad's gun to make her feel sorry for the breakup. That often involves 2 of the deaths out of the 7 because the jilted boyfriend may shoot the girlfriend first and then himself.

Some of the 7 children who die today will die because a toddler found a loaded gun carelessly left in their sight.

My brother, Larry, was almost one of the daily gun shot statistics when he was in high school. He was cleaning his shotgun and suddenly, KaBaam! He blew a hole in the ceiling of his upstairs bedroom! I was downstairs at the time and thought for a minute that he was dead. It was a miracle he didn't get hurt. My parents weren't home. Boy, were they mad when they got home!

I am certain my brother, Jim, would not have taken his own life if he only had access to a knife or pills. Both of those methods would have been too slow and uncertain. He was comfortable with guns. We grew up with guns. And I believe the person who sold Jim that gun without conducting a background check should have been liable for enabling my brother to end his life. But Oregon didn't start doing background checks for gun purchases until 2015. Too little too late for my brother.

I'd like to know how you all responded to the tragic senseless deaths of all the innocents in Las Vegas. --- I am glad to listen. It is important to talk about it.

Pastors must respond publicly to what is being called the biggest gun massacre in US history. It is our job to deal with this tragedy in light of the gospel. But it is all of our jobs to respond to tragedies. We are all accountable to one another. We are all connected and should be each other's keeper. That is what God intended from the beginning when God asked Cain where Able was. And Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In Genesis Chapter 4 God answers Cain with: "YES! Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!"

Our brothers and sisters blood cries out to all of us from the ground, in Las Vegas, from Sandy Hook elementary school, from Aurora, Colorado, from the ground in San Bernadino, from Orlando, from Columbine, and years ago, from Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

It is clear we live in a violent nation. An honest historical reflection reminds us that gun massacres are

not new to this country. The immigrant settlers took over the land we live on today with the help of the US Calvary who used guns to massacre 1000's of Native Americans. Remember in just one gun massacre at Wounded Knee they killed over 350 of our native brothers and sisters and 200 of those killed were unarmed women and children. That was in South Dakota in 1890. My grandmother was alive in Iowa then. It wasn't that long ago.

Now today, we have the high-powered rapid fire automatic weapons used by Stephen Paddock that make it possible to execute 58 of our brothers and sisters in just 11 minutes. Now that rapid killing is new today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that was not possible back in 1890 when it probably took hours to kill 200 Native American women and children with single shot rifles.

So my job as a pastor is to seek out God's message for us today in the context of the tragic loss of life our country keeps experiencing over and over again at the hands of evil gunmen.

I listened for God's message to us all in today's lectionary passage because the Holy Spirit weaves a message for us that can apply to what is happening in our lives today if we listen.

God's message for us today is to become humble like Paul as he describes his transformation from being Saul. When Paul said, "...circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless," Paul was listing all the things that made him proud of himself and admired by many as Saul, the powerful Pharisee.

Paul was explaining to his followers that he had every reason to be proud when he was comparing himself to other Jewish leaders of that time, Paul believed he was one of the most faithful and righteous of all. And he truly was very smart, a well educated scholar of Jewish law, an eloquent speaker, and a self-righteous persecutor of the newly forming Christian church. Paul was speaking as a very self-aware leader in the scripture passage today. .

Yet, despite possessing all these admirable characteristics he calls them all "a loss" compared to the gain he received in converting to be a follower of Jesus Christ. In other words, when he gave up his status in the Jewish leadership for Jesus, his losses were worth it due to the huge gain he experienced in his new life in Christ as Paul.

Getting to know and love Jesus was worth "surpassing value" to Paul. After learning about Jesus and giving his heart to spreading Christ's ministry, the former fame and fortune Paul had accumulated before as Saul seemed to him now as just "rubbish" compared to

all he gained as a believer and evangelist for Jesus. So what changed Saul's heart?

Meeting Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus. After 3 days of being humbled by blindness, Paul understood the message of Jesus: faith, love, hope, and peace. He became devoted to Jesus which caused him to become altruistic. He was willing to give up his life for Jesus Christ. And eventually he did. Before he was martyred, Paul said the line that has become famous: "...I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4)

Paul died grateful for the chance to know and love Jesus who transformed him from being Sadistic Saul into Compassionate Paul.

The conversion from being violent to being humble, peaceful and compassionate seems to be the answer to our society's problem with gun and other forms of violence, too. Can we change from being a sadistic society to a compassionate one?

A Tibetan Buddhist monk researcher, Dr. Matthew Ricard, believes we can all be transformed to be more compassionate and altruistic. And he believes if we don't do more training in altruism, especially when our children are young, our world as we know it will end due to self-centered individualistic behavior, and a lack of compassion for others. This is another good reason to get your kids and grandkids to Sunday School and into Boy and Girl Scouts and other service groups where they learn to be compassionate and caring of others like Key Club with Kiwanis.

Something has to change. We are a nation at war with ourselves. We are literally annihilating one another due to increasing fears caused by self-centered insecurity.

Dr. Ricard has studied happiness over the past 10 years. He recently gave a powerful TedTalk called "How to Let Altruism be Your Guide." In the talk he describes step by step how humans can get out of this self-destructive pattern for the benefit of our communal and individual lives and for the life of our planet. But it takes humbling ourselves and reaching out with help to others rather than fortifying and stockpiling weapons.

([https://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu\\_ricard\\_how\\_to\\_let\\_altruism\\_be\\_your\\_guide#t-364747](https://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu_ricard_how_to_let_altruism_be_your_guide#t-364747))

In times of tragedies, like in Las Vegas last Sunday, examples of altruistic behavior give us great hope and lessen the shock. But not all the people in Las Vegas behaved altruistically. Some people trampled others as they stormed out of the concert area. The Gun Shop owners who sold Paddock the 33 rifles this past year must have had a clue that he was stockpiling weapons with the number of guns he was purchasing. But the gun shops didn't tell the police. Maybe because they were making a big profit. It is a state law in Nevada that the gun shop owners have to report repeated sales of

handguns to one person but the law does not require them to report the sale of a large number of rifles to one person. They could have alerted the police and potentially prevented this tragedy, but they did not.

Turning to guns to solve our problems is not just a mentality that is out there. This is a problem in many churches, too. North Carolina has a law allowing guns to be carried into churches, including church services held in schools. Many Christians are arming themselves because they are fearful. They are in bondage to fear rather than listening to the Bible that repeatedly commands us to: Be Not Afraid and Do Not Fear.

Our whole country seems to be replacing their trust in God with trust in guns. The idea that to feel secure we must be willing to use a lethal weapon against another human is anti-Christian. It is also the kind of mindset that gets ourselves killed, too.

The National Institutes of Health has conducted studies in the past that conclude: a person with a gun on them (or in their home) is nearly 4.5 times more likely to be shot in an armed robbery than someone who is unarmed." They concluded that when the person confronted sees that you are willing to take their life, they decide to take yours first. But when you don't have a gun, they let you live and just run off. And according to an FBI report, unarmed citizens successfully stopped the bad guy in 21 active shooter situations. For example, Gabby Gifford's assailant was stopped by 3 unarmed citizens. They tackled him as he was reloading his automatic rifle.

I know guns. So it isn't hard for me to write a sermon on gun violence because I was raised with guns. I shot tin cans off fence posts with a pistol. I went skeet shooting with my brothers. I was surrounded by hunters and fishers. After my brother Jim came back from Vietnam, he became one of the daily gun death statistics. And after the shock of realizing he was really dead, there was a little bit of a relief in our family that he didn't take other lives with him. That is the only scenario that would have been worse. I feel bad for the family of Stephen Paddock. But we are all in the global family of Stephen Paddock. We must see that he was our responsibility too.

The statistics I quoted to you today were gathered by the Brady Campaign against gun violence. They are not against guns. They are against gun VIOLENCE. But the National Rifle Association has become very wealthy and radicalized over the years.

They want you to believe when one gun is regulated there is a slippery slope to all guns being controlled. They say there is a war against hunting and even hunting rifles are going to be taken away. The NRA is even against putting safeties on guns so they don't accidentally go off and against barring people on the terror watch list from buying guns.

Private gun ownership is a tradition in our country embedded in our culture. But that doesn't mean we should allow the ebola virus-like gun death epidemic to keep spreading. We must have gun registration with background checks in every state, not just 19 states currently.

Rather than supporting the NRA, support The Children's Defense Fund which encourages people of all faiths to observe a Children's Sabbath every year. It is an annual observance aimed at empowering religious communities to improve the lives of children and their families. This year's observance is titled, "**Beating Swords into Plowshares.**" The title is from the Old Testament prophet Micah, who predicts: "God shall judge between many peoples and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and **no one shall make them afraid**; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

The prophet Micah envisions a time when weapons are replaced with tools of food cultivation and economic opportunity. He describes changes at the communal and national levels with an impact on the lives of individuals and families, changes that will allow all to experience peace, and economic well-being. That is what happens when a culture is based on God's love and not on fear.

It's time to say enough! We need to meet Jesus, humble ourselves and face reality; our culture needs more love and compassion! The relentless gun violence virus—that takes a child's life every 3 and ½ hours every day—will continue to spread if we all remain silent and do not act. Jesus calls us not to harm others and points us to the way of nonviolence as the ultimate way to protect the poor, the mentally sick, the concert goers and the vulnerable, with love, not guns.

### **Benediction**

**As we leave here today, May God's wisdom be transformed into compassionate action.**

**May we carry forth the Holy Spirit into the world.**

**May we remember we are One with God and one with every other part of God's creation.**

**May all of creation be unified in Christ's light of love.**

**And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen**



**Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway  
Presbyterian Church of the Roses  
2500 Patio Court  
Santa Rosa, CA 95405**