

“Do Not Lose Heart”

New London UMC

Sunday, June 9, 2024

Psalm II Corinthians 4:13—15:1 *NRSV*

Rev. Joyce Rich

The Gun Violence Archive’s statistics (www.gunviolencearchive.org) track all “mass shootings” in the United States that resulted in four or more people being shot/injured or killed. Per their statistics the **number of mass shootings in the U.S. in 2023 totaled 656**. So if we multiply 656 by 4, that means at least 2,624 peoples’ lives were directly changed due to injury or death. . . . If we take the number of mass shootings in the U.S. from **January 1, to June 4 of this year, which is 197**, and multiply 197 by 4, that means at least 788 peoples’ lives have been directly changed so far this year in the U.S. . . . And if we take the number of mass shootings in the U.S. in the ten-year period from **2014 to 2023, which is a total of 4,684**, and we multiply 4,684 by 4, that means at least 18,736 peoples’ lives in the U.S. were directly changed due to injury or death in mass shootings.

Now in a different database which is maintained by USA Today, The Associated Press, and Northeastern University, they track “mass killings” (and do not include incidents where there were only injuries). And according to their database, non-gun related deaths make up just under 20% of all mass killings in the U.S. And **since 2006 there have been 3,057 people who have lost their lives in 589 mass killings**.

Why do I fling these grim statistics at you on a Summer Sunday morning hymn sing? Why did I encourage you to “Wear Orange” to End Gun Violence this weekend? For starters, people in the U.S. own 46% of the WORLD’s civilian-owned firearms. And too many people in the U.S. have been sent to an early grave, or had life-changing injuries inflicted on them, due to gun violence in our country. And according to the statistics, handguns are far and away the most used weapon in mass killings in the U.S. (even though the mass killings where automatic assault style rifles were used seem to get more news coverage). Handguns. For example: what if only SIX of last year’s 656 mass shootings were carried out by people using automatic assault style rifles; and say another FIFTY mass shooting were carried out by people using regular long guns or rifles; then the other SIX HUNDRED mass shootings were carried out by people using handguns. The prevalence and accessibility of handguns in our country has provided too many dangerous opportunities; and THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE have been killed and injured by the wrongful use of handguns.

As Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians: “But scripture says, ‘I believed, and therefore I spoke out,’ and we too, in the same spirit of faith, believe and therefore speak out.” My friends, just as Paul had to speak out, we NEED to speak out. We can’t act like the prevalence and accessibility of handguns isn’t a problem here in New London, and here in Wisconsin. We can count how many people in our household, or in our extended families, own handguns – and HOW MANY guns they own. And we can add to those totals the number of our friends and neighbors who have handguns in their homes – AND

how many guns they own. . . . Did those quick tallies of gun owners and guns surprise you, or make you feel a little uncomfortable? Because these are just the people that we KNOW. . . . But statistics show that most gun related deaths are carried out by people that the victims knew, and they primarily took place in residential settings.

You may have noticed that the Apostle Paul writes ALOT about the eternal glory that we can't see yet. And you know that we are people who celebrate the resurrection life that Jesus invites us to share with him. And that we give thanks and praise for the abounding grace and glory of God. But my friends, there is no need to rush into shooting out and destroying the earthly frame that houses us today, just to hasten the day when we will "possess a building which God has provided – a house not made by human hands, eternal and in heaven." We are NOT called to readily discard our bodies, even though they are temporary structures. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he wrote:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

1 Corinthians 3:16-18 NRSV

God's Spirit dwells in us and we have been entrusted with the gift of abundant life from God. We have been asked to respect and treasure these holy gifts in ourselves and others. And we have been told not to lose heart while living each day that we have. Because even though our human bodies may be "in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed." So let's work at buying more time for every body to be renewed inwardly. Let's work at being advocates for responsible gun ownership. Sure, someone could have a pistol to do target shooting at a gun range – or to compete as a marksman – but when a handgun is not in use, it needs to have the ammunition removed and stored separately from the gun which is locked up in a gun safe. Because these are the safety steps that a responsible gun owner takes. . . . But having a loaded handgun on your nightstand in the bedroom is not ensuring anyone's safety. Instead, it does look like an open invitation for grandkids to do what they've been told not to do. . . . And having an open display of loaded handguns in the den provides an easy way for an inebriated or angry adult or teenager to do something horribly stupid in response to feeling like they've been insulted or ignored. . . . And whether it is due to an accident in handling a gun, or through deliberate action taken with a gun, too many people are dying and being injured because of ready access to loaded handguns in homes.

If you can make one change in how handguns are handled in your own home; or if you could encourage one family member or friend to make a change in how they handle handguns in their home – wouldn't it be worth it?

Amen.