

So I'll start by straight-up admitting that I'm going to start us off in a pretty dark, heavy place this week.

Last Sunday I woke up to see a news alert on my phone: a mass shooting in Dayton, OH. And I'm sure my reaction to that news was the same as your reaction; some mix of shock and lament and overwhelming weariness. *Oh God, another one?* We'd heard of the El Paso shooting just 13 hours before. And just six days before that there was the shooting at the Garlic Festival in California – which we already seem to have almost forgotten. And of course, those are just the shootings that made the news: Chicago continues to experience almost daily gun violence, and other, smaller-scale shootings – even those that technically fit the definition of “mass shooting” – just don't make the national news.<sup>1</sup>

But last week I just did not have the heart to preach about gun violence *again*. How can we keep talking about it when nothing seems to change? It's exhausting, right? And yet throughout this last week, I've noticed that most of us do feel the need to talk about this violence together and to pray about it together. People keep bringing it up in conversations, in devotions, in Bible studies. And this is a good thing: this is a sign that God is keeping our hearts compassionate and open. We can't let ourselves get hardened, we can't let these mass shootings start to feel normal, because that would mean we've surrendered. That would mean the powers of violence and evil won.

So, as people of faith, let's think about gun violence together again this morning – even though it's exhausting. It's only by really looking this painful reality in the face that we can find a way to hope and maybe even to hear how God is calling us to respond.

I wanted to start by sharing some of an ELCA social message called “Community Violence.”<sup>2</sup> As you listen to this message, try to guess when it was written.

*People who were poor and vulnerable have long experienced life as “nasty, brutish, and short;” now those who thought they were privileged and protected are also haunted by violence. Many of the young, who previously were sheltered from exposure to violence, are...increasingly both its victims and its perpetrators...*

The message goes on to describe the rise of fear nationally, which leads to “tough on crime” policy stances, including use of the death penalty. “Violence and rumors of violence continue to spread – feared yet also expected in daily life.”

Alright, lock in your guesses about what year this was written. It wasn't this week. It wasn't after Parkland. It wasn't after Sandy Hook. It wasn't even after Columbine. It was adopted by the ELCA in 1994. That's twenty-five years ago. That's five years before the shooting at Columbine, which is usually used to mark the beginning of the mass shooting epidemic. And yet it reads like a commentary on today's news headlines.

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1 See the Gun Violence Archive for up-to-date statistics: <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?year=2019> Accessed 10 August 2019.

2 “A Message on Community Violence,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1994. Available online: <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Community-Violence> Accessed 10 August 2019.

That's very depressing. Our church and our nation recognized the problem of violence that long ago, and yet we haven't found our way to solutions. Instead it feels like we've somehow let things get even worse. What we've been doing for the last 25 years – what we're doing now – it's not working. And yet we're stuck in this gridlock.

Reflecting on that history, and living in the world of overwhelming mass-shooting headlines and kids practicing active shooter lock-downs in schools – it gets really easy to feel like God isn't in this with us. Like God is nowhere.

One of the reasons we gather together as a church is to rely on one another – and the presence of the Holy Spirit among us – to build up our faith that God is here with us. That even in the midst of the depressing headlines – and everything else that might be going on in our personal lives – God offers us hope and peace.

How good it is that, after these weeks of tragedy, we could gather together this morning to hear Jesus's comforting words: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." It's a reminder for us: one of Jesus's main messages was that even in a world marred by violence and tragedy, we can trust in God – and God will give us peace in the middle of the storms; God will give us hope and confidence in our future in God's kingdom.

Remember: Jesus also lived in a time of great violence, and his people were suffering from oppression. Jesus offered his words of comfort to those who were most vulnerable, who lived on the edge of danger: the people who were poor, the people who were sick, the people who were outcast, the people who lived with the threat of random violence. His words "Do not be afraid" are not a pie-in-the-sky kind of encouragement; they are not given to those who live in safety and security; but he offers assurance to people who every day faced violence and persecution and hardship. When Jesus said, "Do not be afraid," he was not trying to deny what was going on in the world, but instead he was reminding people that God stood with them as they faced their hardships. That even when the world tries to inject us with fear, God can overpower that fear with God's peace.

But, as I mentioned a few minutes ago, it's often difficult to see God at work to save us in our daily world when it seems like the violence and the fear just keep getting worse. And faced with that problem, that feeling that God has left us to our own devices, it's tempting to turn Jesus's words of comfort into a promise of heaven – and only a promise of heaven.

If you're feeling like that this week, remember: Jesus's words of comfort were not only for the afterlife. They were meant to remind us that God is at work in our world right here and now. We know this because Jesus accompanied his words of comfort with action. He healed people. He transformed people's hearts and minds. He challenged the religious and political norms of his day. He called for change and for justice. He fed people. He consoled people. He lived peacefully and compassionately.

So "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" – on earth as it is in heaven.

Of course this is also a reminder that Jesus did all these good things through his body. God had acted in the world before the incarnation, and I believe the Holy Spirit continues to work in the world today. Many of you have stories of God's power at work in your own lives, both spiritually and physically (and if you're having lunch with family or friends after worship, it might be a good time to encourage one another with those stories). But Jesus's physical presence on earth was the clearest way we have

ever seen God at work in the world. That's why we Christians make such a big deal about Jesus and the incarnation.

Today we, the Church, are Christ's physical body on earth – called to be that clear sign of God's presence. And so God calls us to evangelize, to share the good news of Jesus with the world, not only by talking about the afterlife, and not only by doing good works in our communities, but also by “throwing the light of the gospel on the great human problems of our time.”<sup>3</sup> That means showing the world that believes that God is no where that, actually, God is now here. In these times – and especially in these weeks – that means speaking words of hope while the world despairs. That means promoting peace when the world keeps giving in to this cycle of violence. That means challenging the damaging social habits that the world thinks are “just the way things are.”

We are reminded of this in the gospel reading when Jesus follows up his words of comfort with a call to his disciples: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” We might interpret this: *Don't just sit around trying to feel at peace and waiting for heaven. Anticipate God – and God's work in the world.*

A pastor wrote about this week's gospel story: Jesus's teachings “instruct [his] community to live in the world without being of the world.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, “[His] hearers [like us] live in the real world. He does not seem to expect them to live somewhere else. But they are to feel and desire and to frame their whole existence as if they belong somewhere else.”<sup>5</sup>

The ELCA's “Community Violence” social message puts that teaching in the context of the violence we see in the world around us:

*The Holy Spirit works among us to wrench us from violence, hate, greed, and fear, and transforms us into people who are called to trust God and live in community with one another. In doing so, we need to confront the violent tendencies within ourselves and our society, and find ways to cultivate the practice of nonviolence. Christians, as the salt of the earth (Mt. 5:13) and light of the world (Mt. 5:14), are called to respond to violent crime in the restorative ways taught by Jesus (Mt. 5:38-39) and shown by his actions (Jn. 8:3-11). Rather than reacting out of fear, or out of a vengeful desire to “get even” with those we consider our “enemies” (Lk. 6:27ff), we realize they are our neighbors. We are empowered to take up the challenge to prevent violence and to attack the complex causes that make violence so pervasive.*

So how can we – empowered by the Holy Spirit – challenge this world of violence and offer God's peace? How can we live in the world without being of the world? Let us pray for the wisdom to know, in things great and small. Let us be willing to challenge our world – and ourselves.

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3 W. A. Visser 't Hooft, quoted in Michael Kinnamon's “W. A. Visser 't Hooft's confrontation with nationalist idolatry among Christians,” *The Christian Century*, 8 August 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/w-visser-t-hooft-s-confrontation-nationalist-idolatry-among-christians> Accessed 10 August 2019.

4 Hardy Kim, “Changed by something radically other (Luke 12:32-40),” *The Christian Century*, Sunday's Coming, 5 August 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/changed-something-radically-other-luke-1232-40> Accessed 10 August 2019.

5 Hardy Kim, “August 11, Ordinary 19C (Luke 12:32-40),” *The Christian Century*, Living by the Word, 16 July 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/august-11-ordinary-19c-luke-1232-40> Accessed 10 August 2019.

*God in whom we trust: The world trembles out of control. The violence builds, some by terrorism, some by state greed dressed up as policy, violence on every side.*

*You, in the midst of the out-of-control violence. We confess you steadfast, loyal, reliable, but we wonder if you yourself are engaged in brutality. We confess you to be governor and ruler, but we wonder if you manage.*

*We in the midst of our out-of-control violence, we in great faith, we in deep vocational call, we in our several anxieties. We – alongside you – in the trembling.*

*This day we pray for freedom to move beyond fear to caring, beyond self to neighbor, beyond protection to growth. That we may be a sign of steadfastness, that anxiety may not win the day. You are the one who said, “Do not be anxious.” And now we submit to you. Amen.<sup>6</sup>*

### ELCA Resources on Violence

*A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a Culture of Gun Violence*, (2019). <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Addressing-Social-Concerns/60-Days>

“A Sustained Journey: How the ELCA has addressed the issue of gun violence”, (2019). [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/60DaysGunViolence\\_Summary\\_Overview.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/60DaysGunViolence_Summary_Overview.pdf)

*Community Violence*, social message (1994). <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Community-Violence>

*For Peace in God’s World*, social statement (1995). <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace>

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “God’s Gift in the Midst of Violence,” *Prayers for a Privileged People*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 77-78.