

We Need to Talk About Guns

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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I've been thinking a lot about the first and only gun that I owned. I was given a gun on my 12th birthday, a .22 rifle, and it was a pretty exciting experience. I shot pellet guns and bb guns and plenty of other things, and I was a decent shot so I was gifted with a gun. Not really a big deal to me at the time – everybody had a gun in Alabama, and part of that was just the fact that it was a rural space, and so people used them for hunting, or they legitimately were 2 hours from police being able to arrive. But I have been thinking lately of the casual way that it was given and the casual way it was received. What an interesting time period in the world where a child can be given a gun and it's not a big deal. The thing that I walked away with was that it was so casual. Now a .22 isn't an AR-15, but it showed a bit of the attitude that many communities in the USA take towards firearms.

So we're here to talk a little bit about guns. Now, I want to share a couple of things with you – I'm not a politician, I'm not a public health professional, I'm not someone with all the answers, but I am your minister, and so we are going to talk about guns, because we have to talk about guns and America right now and because this is my lane. I'm going to talk a little bit about the spiritual side of guns and why they present something of a challenge for us, because if we're going to actually fight against these powers and principalities in this world, we are going to have to believe what we are saying on Sunday mornings AND we're going to have to make this country where everyone has access to flourishing.

But first the facts – 100 Americans are killed each day by guns. We've had 320 mass shootings so far in 2019, an average of 1.2. Suicides are the most common death from firearms, and they account for most of all the suicide deaths each year, and Americans are 25x more likely to die by gun violence than peer nations.

The number one reason why people own a gun is for self defense. People want to have protection against people who want to do them harm. Let me put it more simply than that, people own guns because they are afraid in general. They are afraid of a rough and cruel world. They do not want to be the victims of violence, and who can blame that frame of reasoning? And yet, when we open our holy texts we see pretty clear instructions about how we are supposed to feel about fear. Instructions not to be afraid appear in scripture hundreds of times, we are told that perfect love drives out fear, and we know that in our hearts we make better decisions and are more free and more filled with flourishing when we are not afraid. The sci-fi classic, *Dune* perhaps put it best: "fear is the mind killer." And fear also causes us to make bad decisions. The problem of course is that the fear is not

general in this case – fear plays out in highly racialized ways in this country. White people claim fear as a reason to inflict violence upon people of color, which is why unarmed black civilians are 5x more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts, for instance, or that black men comprise 52% of all homicide victims, despite only being 7% of the population. Or take the story of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black 17 year old –

At approximately 7:09 p.m., Zimmerman called the Sanford police non-emergency number to report a suspicious person in the Twin Lakes community. Zimmerman said, "We've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy□...". He described an unknown male "just walking around looking about" in the rain and said, "This guy looks like he is up to no good or he is on drugs or something." Zimmerman reported that the person had his hand in his waistband and was walking around looking at homes. He also mentioned that Martin was wearing a "dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie." On the recording, Zimmerman is heard saying, "these assholes, they always get away."

Zimmerman claimed he was yelling for help, evidently afraid after starting an altercation in which he murdered Martin. Of course, he wouldn't be in a situation to be fearful if he wasn't racist, and Martin would not be dead if a gun were not involved. So, fear is a powerful motivator, and it kills.

And wrapped up with fear is this sense that guns can make you strong. That sort of strength is necessary to go through a rough world, so the thinking goes. And in a world that isn't going to give you some sort of inner strength that it isn't going to fill your soul with a foundational knowledge of your own worth and value and strength, and absent people telling you that real strength is not the ability to kill, but the ability to work towards the benefit of all, then you may think that a gun gives you the sort of strength that you need. And when you are shown that you are not as strong as you had hoped, then you may be violent with this gun. This is why it seems like over it is young men committing these acts of violence – they don't have a good idea about true strength, and this is also why women wind up facing the brunt of this violence:

- Every year, 600 American women are shot to death by intimate partners. Of all women murdered with a gun in the US, half are killed by their intimate partners.
- Nearly 1 million women alive today report being shot or shot at by an intimate partner, and 4.5 million women alive today report that an intimate partner threatened them using a gun.
- When an abuser has access to a gun, a domestic violence victim is five times more likely to be killed.

And so, it is men with no idea what true strength is enacting violence on women. Fear of being powerless, or being rejected, of not being a man enough. The sort of toxic masculinity that poisons all.

And so what ought people of faith say about it? Well, let's start out by acknowledging that it's hard to talk about guns, mainly because the foundational starting point is that it's no one's business and that it's an unconditional right. And yet, with numbers and statistics like these it is society's right to have some hard conversations. I would tell you emphatically that this is your lane as a person of faith. But we only get there through dismantling these pervasive lies and through making the world a place where people can flourish. We are scared to death it seems to me as a people, and that fear leads us to do incredibly harmful things. We, especially men I mean here, are left with so utterly few models for thinking about strength, and so let me lay out some theological truth claims here:

Violence only begets more violence. There is a myth that we can solve violence against us with more violence, but it's simply untrue. Whoever lives by the sword surely will die by the sword. And this is borne out by the fact that if you own a gun you're more likely to die from a gun – makes a lot of sense to me. There's also the fact that if you have a tool at your disposal you are more likely to use it, and we are just not great judges of situations.

True strength comes from vulnerability, self-giving, and a willingness to serve others. This is perhaps the strongest point people of faith have in talking about strength – it involves compassion. This model is rarely the most attractive for young men, but it is a spiritual truth.

Fear is crippling. We cannot live and flourish if our hearts are filled with fear over the future, and that fear can and will cloud our judgment. Becoming a prayerful person means becoming aware of just how little you control anyway.

Our ancient witness readings speak of turning the weapons of war into useful agricultural tools. That is an image of a flourishing society, where folks are able to put away their fears and insecurities and lust for power in order to plant things in the soil and make new life from dead pieces of metal. That is a bit of what we will be doing today after worship. I hope you'll join us as we pray and act in accordance with our values, and work to create a society in which flourishing can be sought for all people.