

Scripture:

1st Reading: Luke 24: 36b-48

2nd Reading: I John 3: 1-7

I don't know about you, but when I read and heard the story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Luke's gospel, I was comforted by his opening greeting, **Peace be with you**. I needed to hear those words this week, Peace be with you. And, I need to hear them again today after this past week of violence. The past week as not been peaceful, has it? Against the background of the trial where the defense and the prosecution rested in Minneapolis, we saw and heard of more violence in another part of Minnesota as well as Chicago. The names of Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo are becoming as familiar as George Floyd and Breanna Taylor. And if that is not enough, the violence of mass shootings at the Indianapolis Fed-EX with 8 killed on Friday, 8 killed in Atlanta about 1 month ago, mostly of Asian heritage, five in North Carolina-a doctor and his wife and 2 grandchildren and repairman indicate we are in a national pandemic, a pandemic not of a virus, a pandemic of violence.

To resolve this pandemic of violence, we must act as the children of God that John identifies us as in his first letter. Children of God that is what we should be because that is what we are-- because we are loved by God, that is what John say writes about in the verses of chapter 3. As children of God, what are we to do with the multiple occurrences of violence, in our city, county, state, and nation?

In Luke's account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples, Jesus' opening words are Peace to you. Don't be frightened. Peace to you. But we are frightened--perhaps even more so than the disciples seeing Jesus post-resurrection. That sighting of Jesus meant good news—good news of peace and life—Christ's grace for our earthly life, Christ's love for our eternal life. The sightings we saw this week, certainly don't mean that. Those sightings of violence are disturbing, too commonplace, contradictory of how we are to live as Christians.

From the Children's Defense fund website: In 2017, 3,410 children and teens died from guns— enough to fill 170 classrooms of 20 children. A child or teen was killed with a gun every 2 hours and 34 minutes. Gun violence saturates our children's lives and remains the second leading cause of death for all children and teens ages 1-19.¹

From the PCUSA site: Within our nation's cities, black Americans are, on average, eight times more likely to be killed by firearms than those who are white. In fact, Black Americans are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide.²

Also from the PCUSA website: The USA firearm homicide rate is 20 times higher than the combined rate of 22 other countries of similar wealth and population.³

¹ <https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/policy-priorities/gun-violence-prevention/>

² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/videos/the-racial-divide-in-gun-violence/>

³ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/peacemaking/gun-violence-resources/>

Not hopeful statistics. A gun violence pandemic exists, is pervasive, and causes fear. But throughout the Bible we hear, do not be afraid, for I am with you, says God.

As children of God, we are called to be peacemakers. As children of God, we are charged by Jesus, in today's scripture, to be released from our fears and to witness to the amazing love and power of Christ Jesus. We cannot escape our fears, regardless of whether our fears are personal or collective. By clinging to the power and reassurance given to us through the presence of Christ seen in the scripture, and in the world, we can begin to leave the locked room and address the issue of violence, particularly gun violence in our community and nation.⁴

In a conversation between Rev. Billy Graham, 20th century evangelist and theologian and social activist, Jim Wallis, we learn of Graham's two pronged approach to ending the violence of nuclear war. This conversation, noted in Wallis' book, *Christ in Crisis, Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, is applicable to our own conversation of gun violence. For Graham, as children of God, we are called to be peacemakers, first by claiming our own personal salvation and then by applying that salvation of the gospel to our lives in the world in which we live. Wallis goes on to say that a deep disconnection exists today between Jesus' call to be peacemakers, loving our neighbors and the prevalence of violence, and accumulation of guns and weapons in our society in an attempt to resolve our conflicts. Reclaiming Jesus means grappling with this question of violence and guns and living into our role of peacemakers as children of God.⁵

When talking about gun violence prevention as a matter of our faith, the PCUSA is clear to say that this is not a campaign that is anti-gun but respects the second Amendment. Yet, as people of faith we must also pay attention to the discrepancies between our faith teachings and the messaging of the media and special interest groups.

So what are we as Presbyterians to do to witness to the hope, peace and love that the resurrection of Christ means to us? In a PCUSA webinar series on their website, called "Standing on Holy Ground: What Can Faith Communities Do About Gun Violence?" Dr. Drew Smith, Professor at PTS discusses the importance in working with children to teach them the value of conflict resolution through love and words.⁶ We are to start with our own children, teaching them to value the power of words in conflict resolution, not the power of fists. Continuing along that spectrum, partnering with public schools as value sharing institutions to help reduce propensity toward conflict and violence, including gun violence is another suggestion of being a peacemaker. Dr. Smith cites the Adopt a School program as a way to help cultivate an environment of beauty through promotion of the creative arts, tutoring, and mentoring. Can our relationship be strengthened with Willard School? Is there something we can be doing that the

⁴Blakely, Nancy. "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word-Year B, Vol. 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. 424-429.

⁵ Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis: Reclaiming Jesus in a Time of Fear, Hatred, and Violence*. HarperCollins Publishing, 2020.

⁶ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/videos/the-racial-divide-in-gun-violence/>

teachers and students need that we can provide? Let us be in prayer together for Willard school and its students and teachers.

Dr. Welch, in the book study conversations of *Just Mercy* over the past 8 weeks tells us that proximity is important to our efforts—the closer we are to the challenge, the more likely we are to respond.⁷ Where in our own neighborhood could we be influential in instilling the hope of a more glorious future that we received 3 weeks ago with the resurrection? Now that we have been gathering at church and at home and have heard and received the power of God's love through Christ's triumph over sin, how can we be reassured to open our own doors, and witness to that love in our neighborhoods—proximate to our own location?

I spoke last week that we will soon begin our neighborhood survey using a tool developed by the Vital Congregations Ministry that will help us understand how other organizations and people view this church. Will we be seen as a closed door fortress or will we be seen as an active part of the neighborhood working toward sharing God's love in the community? That will soon be revealed and can be utilized to help formulate plans for a way forward.

As peacemakers, as children of God, we are called to witness to Christ's love and be a non-violent way in a violent world. Let us find reassurance in Jesus' words, peace be with you. Let us be instruments of God's peace in this world. Hear the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi for peace. May it be our prayer for the week as we recognize and work to alleviate gun violence in our world.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

⁷ Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy*.