

What Then Should We Do?

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, December 16, 2012.

Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

On Friday, our nation witnessed yet another horrific tragedy of gun violence. As police have reconstructed the events of that day, they believe that a young man just 20 years old, shot and killed his mother at home, and then drove to the Sandy Hook Elementary School and shot and killed 26 more people, 20 of them schoolchildren, before turning a gun on himself. It was the second worst school shooting in U.S. history.

Our hearts ache for the families of the victims, especially for the parents who waited and waited to be reunited with their children – fearing the worst, hoping for the best -- only to learn finally that their children were not among the survivors, that they wouldn't be coming home again. I cannot imagine the pain they must be feeling this weekend -- the terrible grief and deep sorrow they must be carrying with them.

The small, quiet community of Newtown, Connecticut, will never be the same. Newtown will be added to the litany of places where school shootings have taken place, a litany that just gets longer: Columbine High School; the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania; Virginia Tech; Sandy Hook Elementary School.

President Obama addressed the nation on Friday afternoon. Fighting back tears, he said: "As a country, we have been through this too many times. Whether it's an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago -- these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children. And we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics."

I was pleased to hear him say that. Taking action to reduce gun violence in our country is long overdue. The question becomes: "What then should we do?" It's the same question that people asked John the Baptist way back in the first century.

In our scripture reading this morning we find John by the Jordan River, a prophet living on the margins of society, fulfilling his prophetic calling from God. John's role was to help people prepare for Christ's coming. But for John, preparing for Christ's coming didn't involve the joy and merriment that we usually associate with preparing for Christmas. No, for John, preparing for Christ's coming meant preparing for a day of judgment. That's why you don't see John's words appearing on many Christmas cards. "Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers," isn't a very popular holiday greeting to send to one's family and friends.

John offers two metaphors for the judgment to come. One is of an orchard in which "every tree . . . that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The other is of a threshing floor from which grain is gathered and stored while the chaff is thrown away to be burned. In John's view, when Christ comes, the righteous will be blessed while the unrighteous will be cursed, condemned to burn in unquenchable fire.

I have a hard time with this view of a day of judgment. I recoil at John's fire and brimstone imagery. Nevertheless, I believe we live in a moral universe, that how we live our lives matters, and that Christ holds us accountable for our actions.

When crowds came out to be baptized by him, he railed at them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John looked at them as though they were snakes slithering away from an oncoming fire in an attempt to save themselves. He admonished them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." It was not enough that they were children of Abraham. What mattered was how they lived their lives.

John was warning that if they didn't change their ways, they were going to be in big trouble. The same is still true for us today! We don't need to wait for the end of history to see the truth in John's words. Pick your issue: health care, energy, drugs, unemployment, war, the national debt, population, global warming, gun violence. If we don't change our ways, we're going to be in big trouble! John was right!

"What then should we do?" the crowds asked John. They weren't satisfied with generalizations about living responsibly. They wanted specifics. And John responded with direct, concrete suggestions that challenged the norms of the day. John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" John said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And then soldiers came and asked him, "And we, what should we do?" John said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

First-century Palestine was considered a zero-sum society in which one person's gain was another person's loss. Honorable people, therefore, did not try to gain more for themselves at the expense of others. Those who did were considered thieves. It was in this context that John the Baptist was calling for an end to greed and the accumulation of possessions. He was speaking out against a system of economic exploitation and corruption that made the rich richer and the poor poorer. In its place, he was calling for economic and social justice, for a redistribution of wealth.

Turn your lives around, John was saying. See that your lives bear good fruit. Live your lives for the common good of all. John calls on us to examine our lives, to ensure that we conduct our lives morally and ethically, with honesty and integrity. And most of us do, or at least we try to.

But then an individual who is angry and upset, or desperately depressed and without hope, or suffering from some other mental illness, gets his hands on a gun, and innocent people – sometimes even little children -- get killed.

What then should we do? How do we prevent such horrific events from happening again and again? How do we identify and treat people with mental health issues before they become a danger to themselves or others? How do we keep guns away from people who shouldn't have them, without trampling on the rights of responsible gun owners?

Earlier this year, I lifted up the example of Australia. Between 1979 and 1996, Australia had 13 mass shootings. But in 1996, after a gunman killed 35 people in Port Arthur, Tasmania, the Australian federal government persuaded all its states and territories to implement tough new gun control laws. National registration of guns was imposed. It became illegal to own certain rifles that might be used in mass shootings. And the gun ban was backed up by a mandatory buy-back program that substantially reduced gun possession in Australia. The effect was that the number of gun suicides and homicides went down and there have been no mass shootings in Australia in the sixteen years since.

What then should we do? Will the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School prove be a turning point in our country? Will the American people – will we -- demand that our government take action? And will politicians find the courage to stand up to the gun lobby -- the National Rifle Association?

As we continue our observance of the Advent season, let us listen for prophetic voices like John's, crying in the wilderness, calling out from the margins of our society. Let us take time to reflect on our lives, and consider what we can do to bear good fruit in the world, to advance the common good. And let us take comfort in Paul's words to the church in Philippi: "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen.

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