

Power From On High...
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
The American Church in Paris – May 17, 2015

Please Read:
Acts 1:6-11
Luke 24:44-53

This has been a difficult week. On Tuesday, the shootings at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, rocked our country and revealed yet again the brokenness of our country. The killing of innocent elders in Buffalo ten days before, and the killing of our youngest and most vulnerable is outrageous. Whatever you may think about gun violence, I think we all can agree with at least two things: Innocent people being shot while shopping for groceries and children being shot in their classroom is not the way it's supposed to be. And secondly, any civilized nation would do just about anything to ensure that these kind of massacres with assault weapons don't happen again.

And that's where the problem is. We don't do much of anything at all. Sure, there is ranting and raving for a while by "liberals." But we just move on until the next shooting and each time become a little more numb and fatalistic about it, confessing "that's just the way it is here."

Whether you like to hear it or not, I believe we live in a culture of violence, and we continue to reap what we sow. Despite what some of our more wishful thinking dictates, there are some uncomfortable truths about our history with which we have to reckon. One of them is the colonial genocide of first nation peoples. The second is slavery and the violence against people of color, specifically African Americans, as integral to our origin as a nation. We ignore these facts at our peril.

From the very beginnings of the early church, we are called to proclaim the good news of God's love in word and deed. We are called to bear witness to another way, the way of Jesus: Jesus is not about violence, but healing. Jesus is not about war, but peace. Jesus is not about sugar-coating the historical narrative, but about confessing the truth that will set us free. Jesus is not about hatred, but about love, and Jesus' love is about giving of ourselves for our neighbors. If you read the teachings of Jesus carefully, you can only come to the conclusion that as followers of Jesus bearing witness to the gospel in today's world means not just talking about these ideas, but about doing something.

Now I know that some of you have already switched off listening to me because you think a) I'm getting too political, or b) any change is impossible, that the powers and principalities are too embedded, too entrenched in our culture for any meaningful change to happen.

And I would respond with three more reminders. 1) Our call is not linked to whether we can be successful. Our call is to be faithful in our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, come what may. This is a crucial point in a society that is all about achievement and success, at whatever cost. We are literally called to die to ourselves, and to live for Christ. 2) Secondly, we are not following the way of Jesus if we simply talk and even just pray about people who are suffering. I was deeply moved by NBA Warriors

Coach Steve Kerr's talk before the game on Tuesday night. He said, "I am so tired of just taking another moment of silence!" In fact our prayers may be part of the problem if we think it's a substitute for action. Faith without action is just noise. In the book of James the blunt truth is, "Faith without works is dead." 3) Finally, as Nelson Mandela once said, "It always seems impossible until it's done." Faith is fundamentally about trusting God. We walk by faith not by sight. We move toward the kingdom of God as we not only think and speak, but act in ways that realize the shalom, the justice, the will of God for all people.

This past Thursday was *Ascension Day*, 40 days after Easter, according to Luke (Acts 1:3). Jesus and his disciples are outside of Jerusalem at Mt. Olivet when Jesus is "lifted up" and taken by a cloud out of their sight. It is a holiday largely ignored by most Protestants, but it is as important a holiday as Christmas or Easter for the Eastern Orthodox. In fact, this is the event where paradoxically Jesus leaves so that his disciples can get on with his work here on earth.

That would be us. Luke writes that first, Jesus orders them to wait. Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will come. Perhaps here is one of the most important theological truths of the Ascension. Jesus is making space for the Holy Spirit to come and be the central engine of the life of the Church. The nature of the Trinitarian God is not about grabbing power and taking center stage. God is about giving power away and making space for others! Jesus needs to leave so the Holy Spirit may take her rightful place as the Advocate, the One who comes along side of the disciples to fill and teach them and send them forth into the world...

It is the Holy Spirit who continues to push us beyond our limited vision and understanding. Notice how the disciples are asking about when God will restore the Kingdom to Israel... (Acts 1:7). Jesus' answer is pointing to a *new paradigm*. The Kingdom God is not about one religious or ethnic group. It is not about a place. Rather, Jesus says, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And then he leaves.

Here is the paradox of the Ascension: Jesus goes up so that we might do his mission down here on earth! And it is the Spirit who is going to help us. The question is, what type of witness are we giving, and what type of Kingdom are we building?

I think first of all it means confronting and confessing the confusing witness the church has given in our history, and even today. I think it is clear that Jesus shows us the way of nonviolence. But the commitment to nonviolence rapidly eroded in the early fourth century when Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the empire. This led to an acceptance of violence and domination against the empire's enemies, but also perceived "enemies" from within: It's what we're seeing in Russia right now. What the empire wants, the church blesses. . . But sadly the church has a long history of blessing various imperial ventures, whether in France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Holland, the UK and the United States. Mainstream Christianity has sadly often aligned and supported violence. And that continues in this country today. If we are worried about young people not being in church, it is fairly easily explained with the

church's hypocritical history of violence toward or, at best, indifference to the suffering of the LGBTQ community, women, people of color, along with at best passive support for militarism.

Today we have some Christians loudly supporting gun rights. What is terribly ironic to me is that these same Christian leaders are much more concerned about taking away the right of a woman to make choices about what happens in her own body than about sensible restrictions on assault weapons or background checks...mystifying at best, infuriating at worst!

This weekend is also Memorial Day weekend, and I hope you can enjoy the parade and attend the memorial service to honor those who have given their lives so we can enjoy the freedoms we have. I also invite you to consider that we are called to give our lives so that our children, our elders, indeed all of our citizens have the freedom to live in peace and without the fear of being killed with random gun violence.

In 1963, almost 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere..." While Dr. King was talking about racism, the same is true for gun violence. It's a national issue.

I realize I sound like I'm on a crusade, and religious crusades haven't always worked out very well in the past. But I know our job is to give witness in various ways. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think it includes doing something about gun violence in this country. As emotionally charged as such issues make us, we must always give witness to the love of God...

While I was at my class reunion this week, President Craig Barnes told the story of the great biblical scholar Bruce Metzger (chief editor of the NRSV), who in a rare moment stopped reading his lecture notes about the mission of the church, took off his gold rimmed glasses and said to the students, "When you are in pastoral ministry, I want you to remember to daily get on your knees to pray, and thank God that *you are not necessary.*" Craig resisted the urge to raise his hand in protest, and the class ended and graduation came quickly and he never got the chance to challenge Dr. Metzger. Surely, Craig thought, we are all necessary?

It was at his five-year reunion when Craig Barnes saw Dr. Metzger walking on campus and said, "Dr. Metzger, I've been thinking about something you said in a lecture years back that has always bothered me, and I wondered if you would care to revise your comment that we should be thankful that we are not necessary?" Dr. Metzger paused for a moment, and said, "No. I stand by that comment. But the reason is different than you imagine. You are not necessary, but you are *beloved.*"

The Spirit's power is not the love of power, but the power of love. Salvador, the name of the shooter in Uvalde, ironically, means savior. He needed a savior, and I wonder if we could reduce the number of shootings in this country, both murders or suicides, if we could more faithfully bear witness to the good news of a savior who declares that while we may not be necessary, we are beloved of God?

The power from on high takes us low. Humility. Service. Self-giving love. I believe we are called to do something about the scourge of gun violence. With God all things are possible, and I believe we can make a difference. I believe we are called to speak, to pray, to act, to invest in peace so that those who fought in wars and gave their lives to secure peace for us might be remembered and respected...

So, "Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you, will come in the same way as you saw him go. For soon the Holy Spirit will come to you in power, and you will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and New Canaan and to the ends of the earth!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.