

Sermon Warriors in the Shadows
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Sermon Warriors in the Shadows Rev. Sarah Person

One week ago, at a Sunday country music event in Las Vegas, automatic gunfire rained down on 22,000 concertgoers. In the aftermath, one musician tweeted he that he had been "a proponent of the Second Amendment my entire life." ... "Until the events of last night. I cannot express how wrong I was." ... "Enough is enough." We all want to see ourselves as heroes, but clearly there can be evil in the shadows of the things we believe. Has your stand on gun control changed? We want to make ourselves and our children safer, and we need to come to grips with our propensity for violence as the answer. Please join us as we give voice to our grief at the loss of innocents, and our potential grief at the loss of our convictions.

In the interests of full disclosure,
I will begin by telling you I am not a gun owner,
and not particularly gun literate.
My only experience with weapons was high school archery
when I'd regularly overshoot the targets
and landscapers on the hill beyond would flee for their lives.
My only personal experience with the National Rifle Association
goes back to an ugly episode almost forty years ago.
My mother, a widowed schoolteacher,
owned a cat whose leg was virtually severed by a leghold trap.
A rights organization persuaded her
to join a lawsuit against the trap's manufacturers.
During the course of the trial,
she received vile and threatening phone calls
from members of the NRA.
She didn't back down,
but it was a frightening window
into how far some hotheads will go
to protect their "principles."
It was my first taste of organized intimidation.
I wanted to take them apart with my bare hands.
"That's hell," the monk would have said.

And hell is watching as a single shooter
rained automatic gunfire down on 22,000 concertgoers.

And hell is knowing how familiar this all is.
Orlando, Sandy Hook, Newtown.

And hell is listening to commentators respond by saying
mass shootings are "the price of freedom. ...
The Second Amendment is clear
that Americans have a right
to arm themselves for protection. Even the loons."

And hell is Trayvon Martin,
shot for walking in a neighborhood.
And hell is Yoshihiro Hattori,

shot for ringing the doorbell of the wrong house.

For almost forty years
I've been trying to look at hell
through the eyes of faith,
with the perspective of faith.
For almost forty years I've tried to discern
a path out of this kind of hell. And life goes on.

Yesterday I turned on the television
while I fed the cat at some ungodly hour
and a show from my childhood came on
– The Rifleman with Chuck Connors.
This is what we grew up on;
Roy Rogers, The Rifleman,
Have Gun – Will Travel, Maverick,
Wanted Dead or Alive, Peter Gunn.
They were the archetypal heroes of the post World War II age.
They were clever, good men
who solved peoples' problems;
who could shoot,
but didn't unless they absolutely had to.
Plot lines spent half an hour justifying the firing of their guns
– if guns were fired at all.
In these carefully scripted settings,
the threat of violence was a deterrent.
What was the next generation of the reluctant hero with a gun?
The Kung Fu priest.
These stories, these myths really,
were an essential part of our formative years.
You might even say we were conditioned.

What was it Martin Luther King said?

By our silence, by our willingness to compromise principle... by our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim, by allowing our movie and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing, by allowing all these developments, we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What did we learn, we who grew up with these heroes?
The hero is the one who can resolve the threat.
Do we share archetypal heroes,
gun ownership advocates and gun control advocates?
Does the warrior image appeal to us;
do we think of ourselves as the protectors?
We both want to deter violence.
We want to deter death and injury
and the overwhelming grief that follows.
We both want to serve a greater good;
despite the fact that 'the greater good'
means something different to each side.

Where does my faith lead me in all this?
My faith wants me to close the gaps that separate us.
How do I do this?
There is a gap
between me and someone who shoots at targets,
or hunts to feed themselves.
There is a gulf between me
and someone who carries a handgun for protection.

A person who owns a gun owns something made to kill;
not something that can be used to kill, but something made to kill.
And a gun owner who owns it in order to have protection
must be willing to use it to kill another human being
for it to be any kind of deterrent.
This is a decision, a moral decision,
difficult to make but accepted by owners nonetheless.

And a gun owner, as my colleague Suzelle Lynch points out in her sermon,
must be willing to accept that
that gun may be stolen and used for a crime,
or used by a careless child,
or used by someone desperately unhappy with life.
In spite of the gun owner's conscience,
in spite of the gun owner's responsibility,
in spite of the gun owner's reasonable fears,
The gun might be used by them or others to kill the innocent.
This is the shadow side of the hero, the warrior;
the fact that it must be accepted to balance the equation of protection.

I see all this and think;
guns don't kill people, people kill people,
so people can't be trusted with guns.
There is this gap, this line,
that I don't want to cross and others do – others I want to respect.

I know in my heart
that the vast majority of gun owners in our country
are responsible people,
people who do not use them to kill others on a whim or a will.

I know that there are people
who firmly believe that
being prepared to shoot is the best deterrent
against a perceived threat.

I also know that gun manufacturers
have made machines that are intended to kill
more quickly, more effectively
and in greater numbers with less effort.
As if this was a natural progression of the lethal;
a natural and necessary evolution

in research and development and marketing strategy.

Do people who covet such machines,
who work so hard to protect their right to own them,
seriously imagine they need them for protection? Against whom?

Outside of war; madmen and mad children
have used these weapons against human beings
in explosions of outrage against the innocent.

I am seeing stirrings of a different kind of grief of
those who have been proponents of gun rights.
I am seeing searing and anguished regret.

What was it that drove them to protect the possession this firepower?
It was fear; the fear of being met with greater power,
the fear of being vulnerable, fear of the stranger,
fear of violence, of being hurt of suffering of grief.

Perhaps that is where my faith is leading me.
What is the opposite of fear, the enemy of fear?
It is love. And I'm not talking about ivory tower flower power love;
I'm talking about real active and activating love,
The love that responds out of the depths of our own shadows,
that recognizes the fears we *all* share,
and refuses to be overcome by the need to protect ourselves at any cost.
We who choose to love know we cannot avoid suffering.
We who choose love have a drive to protect ourselves,
but we also have a drive for connection,
for wholeness, for dependence and for peace.

Change will not happen without connection.
If we, gun owner advocates and gun control advocates alike,
are to find a place of meeting and to find a place of change,
we need to find those fears we have in common.
We fear the death of innocents.
We fear our desensitization to the death of innocents.
We fear our responsibility for the death of innocents.

It is unbearable to think that it is no protection against evil.
My task, our task, is not to explain
why the unimaginable happens,
but to bear witness to the truth of our shadows,
to prevent them from destroying our connections to one another,
and to find the way back to our light.
I believe that God weeps.
I also believe that God is in
the minds and hearts and hands of those who tried to save the innocent,
who stood for the dead,
who treated their remains with tenderness,
and comforted the living
whether or not they had guns in their hands.

I believe with all my heart that God leads us
to be the people and to seek the people
that will change us profoundly and enable us to go on.
We live and breathe in the balance of these things;
the shadows and the light, hell and heaven.

May we be the instruments of thy peace and our transformation. Amen.