

## ***Gun Control: Yes!***

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*People say, what is the sense of our small effort?  
They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.  
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our  
thoughts, words and deeds is like that.  
No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless.  
There's too much work to do. —Dorothy Day*

### **Invitation to worship:** (from Isaiah 2)

In days to come  
the mountain of the HOLY ONE's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains.  
**Many people shall come and say,**  
**“Come, let us climb to the mountain of the HOLY ONE,**  
that we may be instructed in God's ways  
and walk in God's paths.”  
**They shall beat their swords into plowshares,**  
**and their spears into pruning hooks.**

### **Ancient Witness:** Matthew 26:51-52

*And behold one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword,  
and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your  
sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”*

From the title of today's sermon you can probably tell that I'm going to be a little polemical. Now some might not like that, but I think it's O.K. We sometimes confuse polemics with incivility, and that is not necessarily the case. One can take a strong and clear position with respect and civility. Indeed, it's sometimes necessary! Not to be polemical can be the luxury of privilege.

I'm not after agreement. I'm after transformation—which is what a church is after, primarily—inner transformation. And this can happen as we are challenged and as we question and reflect upon matters of ultimate concern. And it is out of this higher consciousness that never stops emerging that we are driven to transform human society.

When I preach, I do not speak for this church—everyone here. And I do not pretend to speak for God. I speak for myself. My sermons are I-statements with the hope that listeners develop their own I-statements that can be very different than mine.

Since I've moved here a month ago one of the unavoidable realities I've noticed is gun violence. Every day in Columbus we read of shootings from the night before. We are a nation awash in gun violence, and we're numb to it now. In 2022 there were 647 mass shootings in this country and over 80 in January and February of this new year: 3 killed and 5 injured at Michigan State, 6 killed in

Mississippi, two shootings in California where 14 were killed and 13 injured, 8 killed in Utah, 4 killed in New Richmond, Ohio—it goes on and on.

And when it comes to gun violence, the United States is one of the most violent nations in the world. According to a Children's Defense Fund's report, *Protect Children, Not Guns*, almost 2,700 children and teens died from guns in 2010. That's about one every 3 hours and more than 22 every three days. Another 15,576 children and teens were wounded by guns. Between 1963 and 2010, an estimated 166,500 children and teens died from guns, more than three times the U.S. soldiers killed in that time in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars combined.

Marian Wright Edelman concludes,

*By any standards of human and moral decency, children in America are under assault, and by international standards, America remains an unparalleled world leader in gun deaths of children and teens—a distinction we shamefully and immorally choose!*

The CDC recently said that the leading cause of death of children is not cancer or car accidents but gun violence. As the prophet, Jeremiah, said,

*A voice is heard in Ramah,  
mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.*

And we can here this voice, this mourning and weeping, every day in this country.

And it's a good thing that Chicago and other cities have good restrictions on the guns. And I know that Columbus is working on its own measures. But almost all of the guns are purchased legally and enter Chicago from areas that are far less restrictive.

And so neighboring states, indeed, the whole nation, it seems to me, need to institute tougher laws to regulate and control firearms. Will that be The Answer? Perhaps not. The endemic, rampant violence and violence related to guns is affected by many things, such as poverty, mental health and social breakdown. But it is impossible to deny the importance of legal restrictions and the relationship between the availability of guns and gun violence. Legal restrictions may not be sufficient but are necessary. We know that it works. Where there was an assault weapons ban from 1994 to 2004, studies show that the rate of mass shooting deaths was reduced.

Several years ago in *The Atlantic*, Max Fisher noted that the United States has the loosest gun control laws in the world and the highest rate of gun-related homicide. By far. Of the 23 wealthy countries, gun murder rate in the U.S. is 20 times the other 22. For the teens and young adult segment, it is 43 times higher. And in the U.S., there are now more privately owned guns than people—over 400,000.

The gun murder rate in the United States is six times higher than Canada, 30 times higher than the U.K. and Australia, and several hundred times higher than Japan. What we see is that the tougher the laws, the less guns and the less violence and death. We know that it works.

The last I checked, each of these other countries is a democracy with high levels of quality of life. And so, it seems to me, that unfettered, universal access to guns as an “inalienable right” is not a precondition to a democratic society.

Australia is an interesting case. After 12 mass shootings in a decade, the pro-gun Conservative, John Howard, pushed through an ambitious gun control program. They banned all automatic and semiautomatic weapons, instituted strict licensing rules and started a buyback program where 650,000 weapons were voluntarily handed in and destroyed.

The case of Japan is even more dramatic. In 2008 there were 11 people killed with a gun there, and that was a big year. In 2006 there were two! Fisher wrote,

*To get a gun in Japan, first, you have to attend an all-day class and pass a written test, which are held only once per month. You also must take and pass a shooting range class. Then, head over to a hospital for a mental test and drug test (Japan is unusual in that potential gun owners must affirmatively prove their mental fitness), which you'll file with the police. Finally, pass a rigorous background check for any criminal record or association with criminal or extremist groups, and you will be the proud new owner of your shotgun or air rifle. Just don't forget to provide police with documentation on the specific location of the gun in your home, as well as the ammo, both of which must be locked and stored separately. And remember to have the police inspect the gun once per year and to re-take the class and exam every three years. (“A Land Without Guns,” *The Atlantic*, 7/23/12)*

In spite of all this evidence, in spite of our daily experience of horrific gun violence and death, this nation seems to be heading in the wrong direction with our version of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment “gone wild,” supporting the unassailable legitimacy and the sheer idolatry of guns in our nation.

It begins with the 27 words:

*A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.*

Several ago, Jeffrey Toobin wrote in *The New Yorker* that this radical interpretation is fairly new:

*The re-interpretation of the Second Amendment was an elaborate and brilliantly executed political operation, inside and outside of government. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 brought a gun-rights enthusiast to the White House. At the same time, Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, became chairman of an important subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and he commissioned a report that claimed to find “clear—and long lost—proof that the second amendment to our Constitution was intended as an individual right of the American citizen to keep and carry arms in a peaceful manner, for protection of himself, his family, and his freedoms.”*

The NRA also funded their own studies. And in 2008 we had a disastrous, in my view, Supreme Court decision in the case, *District of Columbia v. Heller*, that enshrined the individual rights view of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. Scalia stopped short of creating individual rights for contemporary military weapons but ruled that D.C. could not ban handguns because “handguns are the most popular weapon chosen by Americans for self-defense in the home.”

Scalia wrote that the first phrase about the militia (militias, by the way, were controlled by the government to suppress insurrections, not lead them) was just a “preface” and not related in any meaningful way at all to the second clause of the right of the people to bear arms.

Of course, rational control measures do not take away everyone’s guns any more than motor vehicle laws take away cars. And even if it did come to a choice between someone’s recreational activity and the lives of children, I’m going to choose the latter every time. And statistically, the possession of a firearm makes one’s household significantly *less* safe and not more protected from harm.

In another recent article in *Vanity Fair*, Kurt Eichenwald calls for us to step back and institute reasonable restrictions, such as required liability insurance for all gun owners (the same kind of requirement we have to operate cars.) The evolution of weaponry has created a risk to other citizens that the framers never could have imagined and that the government must take into account. And he writes:

*The problem is, for a variety of reasons, the Second Amendment has been twisted and bastardized in ways that could never have been conceived at the time of the nation’s founding...*

*As written, though, the amendment has nothing—nothing—to do with modern America. Worse, it is the biggest mess of verbiage in the whole Constitution, making its actual meaning almost impossible to discern. We need to get rid of it and try again with an amendment that makes sense. (“Let’s Repeal the Second Amendment,” 1/3/2013)*

I agree with him! And I’d add that *even if* the framers intended the amendment as it is currently interpreted, they were fallible. They were wrong. And they were wrong before. Wrong that African Americans counted only as 3/5 of a full person. Wrong that women weren’t fully equal and able to vote. And so we corrected them before, and we can correct them again.

Now, in light of all this, much has been made that we are a very religious nation. But it seems to me that if this is true, we have become disconnected from our spiritual roots. This is the only way I can understand our love affair with the gun. Regarding my own Christian tradition, I remember something I heard Richard Rohr say so well:

*How can you read the eight Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount and not believe that Jesus was teaching non-violence? It’s impossible.*

*The turning point was in the year 313 with the edict of Constantine where overnight we became the imperial religion. Once you are the army instead of the Christians persecuted in the catacombs, everything Jesus says about non-violence is unhearable. It’s unthinkable.*

Ah. And so it also comes down to this—a spiritual challenge—a challenge for each of us. Another acquaintance and U.C.C. minister colleague, Robin Meyers, wrote in his book, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*,

*Scholars are now united in this important finding: for at least two centuries, once a Christian was baptized, he could no longer consider military service. Just imagine a baptismal ceremony today that included language prohibiting the initiate from ever enlisting in the armed forces. Imagine being immersed, lifted out of the water, and pronounced a pacifist for life.*

“There will be no recovery of Christianity as a vital and transformative force in the West,” he wrote, “without a return to our pacifist roots.” (p. 114)

Now we can quibble about degree, but I really think he’s onto something. With an awakening of our hearts, a shift in consciousness and a reconnection to our spiritual root—the source of life and love and peace—we can do this. We can become vital and transformative again and a voice of sanity in our nation.

Look, we are a nation driven by fear and addicted to weapons. Like clockwork, federal budget proposals call for cuts in medicaid, health care, education, environmental protections, even school lunches, while increasing already obscene levels of military spending. We are turning plowshares into swords, as a nation! And as people of faith, it seems to me, we need to work to reverse this madness.

For we are guided by a higher vision stated by the prophet, that someday we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, our guns into school lunches and our missiles into healthcare for all. As Cornel West likes to say, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the last word.”

I’m going to end this morning with a song by folk artist, Cheryl Wheeler. She wrote it after a 13 and 11 year old shot and killed a teacher and four classmates, and wounded 10 others in Jonesboro, Arkansas. I heard her perform this in Cincinnati back in the 90’s.

*Maybe it's the movies, maybe it's the books  
Maybe it's the bullets, maybe it's the real crooks  
Maybe it's the drugs, maybe it's the parents  
Maybe it's the colors everybody's wearin  
Maybe it's the President, maybe it's the last one  
Maybe it's the one before that, what he done  
Maybe it's the high schools, maybe it's the teachers  
Maybe it's the tattooed children in the bleachers  
Maybe it's the Bible, maybe it's the lack  
Maybe it's the music, maybe it's the crack  
Maybe it's the hairdos, maybe it's the TV  
Maybe it's the cigarettes, maybe it's the family  
Maybe it's the fast food, maybe it's the news  
Maybe it's divorce, maybe it's abuse  
Maybe it's the lawyers, maybe it's the prisons  
Maybe it's the Senators, maybe it's the system  
Maybe it's the fathers, maybe it's the sons  
Maybe it's the sisters, maybe it's the moms  
Maybe it's the radio, maybe it's road rage  
Maybe El Nino, or UV rays  
Maybe it's the army, maybe it's the liquor  
Maybe it's the papers, maybe the militia  
Maybe it's the athletes, maybe it's the ads  
Maybe it's the sports fans, maybe it's a fad  
Maybe it's the magazines, maybe it's the internet  
Maybe it's the lottery, maybe it's the immigrants*

*Maybe it's taxes, big business  
Maybe it's the KKK and the skinheads  
Maybe it's the communists, maybe it's the Catholics  
Maybe it's the hippies, maybe it's the addicts  
Maybe it's the art, maybe it's the sex  
Maybe it's the homeless, maybe it's the banks  
Maybe it's the clearcut, maybe it's the ozone  
Maybe it's the chemicals, maybe it's the car phones  
Maybe it's the fertilizer, maybe it's the nose rings  
Maybe it's the end, but I know one thing.  
If it were up to me, I'd take away the guns.*

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*