

Why Gun Violence is a Religious Problem

Cathedral Age March 23, 2016



December's horrific shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., came at the end of a year filled with shocking gun deaths. There were mass shootings, as at the Wisconsin Sikh Temple and the movie theater in Aurora, Col. There was the daily drumbeat of gun deaths in urban neighborhoods across America. Something about the Newtown massacre finally prompted many preachers, including me, to address the problem. Enough, we said, was enough.

Those of us who have taken on the gun issue in pulpits have received much response—most of it positive, some of it critical. We are lauded for taking a public stand on an important issue, taken to task for mixing politics and religion. From the beginning of my foray into this matter, I have consistently said that the Church should address it because gun violence is primarily a religious issue. I'd like to use this opportunity to explain what I mean.

Defining Evil

In the early days following the Newtown shootings, I was called on in interviews to respond to a characterization of that event as an example of evil. It happens, however, that I had the opportunity to do some extended thinking about evil as a philosophical and religious problem in the year before I came to the Cathedral: I taught a class to seniors at Cranbrook School, where I was serving as chaplain, called "The Problem of Evil." This was not a class I would have thought up on my own; I took it over from a faculty colleague who had to leave school suddenly because of a family emergency.

One of the things I learned in preparing for that class is that our definition of evil has changed over time, though we have always defined evil as having to do with the suffering of the innocent, we talk about evil differently in the post-twentieth century world from how we did before. Before the modern (let alone postmodern) era, people tended to think of evil as something with cosmic causes: the innocent suffered because they were possessed by demons, say, or because the larger evil force personified as Satan created chaos. In the age of science, though, our definition of evil has shifted: we now increasingly define "evil" as something caused by human agency: genocide, oppression, sexual abuse.

When the 2011 earthquake struck Washington National Cathedral, nobody characterized that event as an example of evil. When the 2012 shootings at Newtown happened, though, everyone did. Prior to the twentieth century, clergy were routinely called on to explain the meaning of natural calamities. Nowadays we're asked instead to address the disasters made by human beings.

Human Suffering

Whether we think of evil as caused by cosmic or human activity, the problem of innocent human suffering is still a core religious question. Every major religion attempts to explain (or at least respond to) suffering. In our own tradition, the Bible gives us the story of Job and, of course, the example of Jesus.

Job—the exemplary man whose children, possessions, and health are taken from him for no fault of his own—is an example of the premodern sufferer. Jesus—the exemplary man who dies at the hands of what the old Prayer Book called “sinful men”—could be said to be the first example of modern or postmodern suffering. Both are innocent. One suffers at the hand of God, one suffers at the hands of people. Neither deserve what they get. We are left to make sense of their suffering as best we can.

Christians (as well as Jews and Muslims) have long found the meaning of innocent suffering less in speculation about its cause and more in the response it elicits from us. Think of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, where three people leave a man to die in the road and only one responds by giving him aid. Think of the crucifixion of Jesus himself, which arouses the compassionate response of the men and women who were his companions. Think of the book of Acts, where the earliest Christian community is seen as a sort of underground social service network, bringing aid and comfort to those cast aside by the Roman Empire. The Bible may not speak with one voice about why suffering happens, but it is unanimous in its claim that human suffering demands the active response of faithful people. Jesus was probably more famous in his day as a healer than as a teacher. God’s will is that people live whole, free, joyful lives. And God has gathered a community who will work to bring wholeness, freedom, and joy wherever there is sickness, oppression, and pain.

So one way to understand the Church’s call to end gun violence in America (or at least greatly reduce it) is to see this call as the natural consequence of our compassionate response to human suffering. We follow One who died at the hands of violence. That One has called us to be agents of love and healing in the world. The only way we can address large-scale questions of love and justice is in the public arena. And when we enter the public arena, we necessarily have to do with politics.

A Public Church

When people complain that activism to eliminate gun violence is political and that preachers should get back to religion and leave politics to others, I have two responses. One is about the nature of public life. The other is about the nature of a public church.

Christians have no warrant to think magically. If we are to be postmodern (and not premodern) in our response to evil, then we will agree that, for us in the twenty-first century, the problem of evil is a human problem. Innocent people die because people do bad things. Societies deal with people who do bad things by acting corporately to prevent and punish bad behavior. They act corporately by means of legislative action. Because we live in a republican democracy, our laws are enacted not from above but by means of political organizing. If we want to deal with a public, human problem, then politics are necessarily going to be involved. “Politics” is not a dirty word. It’s the way human beings organize their social lives.

For us Christians, the Bible is the source of our teaching on moral and ethical issues. And when we look at the Bible for guidance, we discover what often surprises people who are unfamiliar with the scriptures. Instead of being preoccupied with the individualistic moral problems that dominate our contemporary thought, the Bible is overwhelmingly concerned with public—not private—morality. The big problems for the Bible’s voices (the prophets and Jesus) are social issues: economic justice, relief for widows and orphans, fair treatment of those who live at life’s margins. For every admonition about personal behavior, the Bible probably has five exhortations toward social compassion and justice. The pervasive individualism of American culture tends to read the Bible through the lens of its own preoccupations and so to cast morality as primarily a personal and private affair. But morality for the Bible is primarily a public business. For the scriptures, justice in Israel is a higher priority than personal moral decisions. It’s not that the latter are not important; it’s just that the former is exponentially more so.

Taking Action

All of which leads me to say that reducing gun violence and taking the necessary political steps to do so are, at their root, profoundly spiritual concerns. As people of faith, we are repeatedly asked to respond to and alleviate the suffering of the innocent. However you define evil—whether it’s caused by the devil or by a madman—faithfulness to Jesus and the One he calls his Father demands that we respond in compassion. Because there is nothing we can do to prevent natural disasters, when tsunamis and earthquakes happen the best we can do is send aid. Human behavior is responsive to concerted action. When malevolence causes the deaths of children—in schoolrooms and on city streets—we can and must take action both to heal and to stop it. A church that did nothing in the face of innocent suffering wouldn’t be worthy of the name.

Although I am the leader of Washington National Cathedral, I do not presume to speak for the Cathedral or its members. But I do try to articulate what I hear God calling us to do. I realize that everyone in our life does not agree with me. Anglicanism is a comprehensive tradition, and people of good will can differ about the best means to address questions of social and personal suffering. The goal, of course, is to eliminate gun violence. The exact mix of the ways we do that—gun legislation, mental health reform, a more critical look at the culture of violence—is open to conversation. I believe that the goal and the dialogue around it are holy, and that we are acting in the best, deepest traditions of the Gospel when we take up these questions and act on behalf of past, present, and future victims.

“All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah’s words are routinely applied to Jesus, and they could be said of the victims of Newtown, Aurora, Columbine, and Virginia Tech, too. I ask that you join me by studying, thinking, praying, and acting to stop gun violence in America. How we face into and address the iniquity laid on Jesus and those who die violently will prove the measure of what kind of a church we finally are.

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