

“Hope in a Time of Mass Murder”

Steve Ramer
August 18, 2019

Scriptures

John 16:1 “I’ve told you these things to keep you from being led astray. 2 They are going to expel you from the synagogues. Indeed, a time will come when those who kill you will claim that they are doing God a service.

...20 I swear to God, you will weep and mourn while the rest of the world celebrates. You will grieve, but your grief will turn into joy. 21 A woman suffers pain when she gives birth, because her time has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers her labor because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. 22 And so you are now grieving. But I will see you again, and then you will rejoice and nobody will be able to take that joy from you. ...33 I have told you all this so that you may possess my peace. In the world you’re going to have troubles. But be resolute! For I have subdued the world!”

1 John 2:12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name. 13 I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.

1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Sermon

Immediately following the mass killings in El Paso and Dayton, like many of you I found myself grieving, going through many of those all too familiar stages - but of course, in no particular order.

I really couldn’t deny what had happened but I often felt numb no longer shocked or surprised that 32 people had been killed and over 40 injured in less than 14 hours.

Personally, there was little bargaining since most of the culprits were clear; gun manufacturers, the NRA, ineffective and callous politicians and yes of course the President.

And though I do not believe acceptance is acceptable in this situation I did struggle with serious feelings impotence to really stop any of it.

But as a pastor I was convinced I had to say something.
I felt an obligation to comfort those of my flock
who like me, I knew were also grieving.
But what could I say? Words of wisdom didn't seem to come.

And so, I do know if I have anything all that profound
for you this morning.
Maybe, at best, a few errant thoughts that I jotted down?
I don't think it is healthy to deny the pain, grief, fear or paralysis.
I also believe that together as a community we can bring our
deepest feelings and then together find a way through
our despair and respond with hope instead!

But first let me share some statistics to place our discussion into context.
And if your interested you can find these and other disturbing facts at:
<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>

- As of this morning, there have been 261 mass shootings in the US (that killed or injured at least 4 individuals not counting the shooter) so far this year which is of course more than one per day.
- Since Dayton there have been 14 mass shootings that have injured 62 people and killed 8.
- Researchers at Harvard University, have determined that mass shootings have tripled in frequency in recent years.
- And when the shootings do occur, they're more deadly.
- The five deadliest mass shootings have all occurred since 2007.
- Since the first of the year there have been over 35,000 separate events that a gun was used to harm others resulting in over 9300 deaths and more than 18,000 injuries.
- Nearly 1300 of these involved law enforcement officers as the shooters.

Mass shootings are truly horrific and understandably catch our attention but they are also one more symptom of the
incredibly violent culture that we live in.

And anytime a gun is used against another human being
it is a tool meant to intimidate and terrorize.

Fear is likely the most prevalent response and the main motivator
and so the antidote must replace fear with something more powerful.

Getting good information can be one place to start.
A recent LA Times article highlighted some critical facts gleaned
from recent research into perpetrators of mass shootings.

First, the vast majority of mass shooters experienced early childhood trauma and exposure to violence. The nature of their exposure included parental suicide, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and/or severe bullying.

Second, practically every mass shooter had reached an identifiable crisis point in the weeks or months leading up to the shooting. They often had become angry and despondent due to a specific grievance. For workplace shooters, a change in job status was the trigger. For shooters in other contexts, relationship rejection or loss often played a role. Such crises were, in many cases, communicated to others through a marked change in behavior, and expression of suicidal thoughts or plans, or specific threats of violence.

Third, most of the shooters had studied the actions of other shooters and sought validation for their motives. People in crisis have always existed. But in the age of 24-hour rolling news and social media, there are scripts to follow that promise notoriety in death.

Societal fear and fascination with mass shootings partly drives the motivation to commit them.

Mass shootings tend to come in clusters and are socially contagious. Perpetrators are also easily radicalized online as they search for validation from others.

Fourth, the shooters all had the means to carry out their plans. Once someone decides life is no longer worth living and that murdering others would be a proper revenge, only means and opportunity stand in the way. Is an appropriate shooting site accessible? Can the would-be shooter obtain firearms? In 80% of school shootings, perpetrators got their weapons from family members, while workplace shooters tended to use handguns they legally owned.

And from the front page of last Sunday's New York Times, I would like to add another troubling similarity - misogyny. Mass shooters are nearly all men.

Since 1966 there have been 150 mass shootings occurring in a public place and in only three was a woman the shooter. Research shows that most mass shootings are rooted in domestic violence.

and that most mass shooters have a history of domestic or family violence in their background.

Experts also pointed out that the same patterns that lead to the radicalization of white supremacists and other terrorists can also apply to misogynists who turn to mass violence.

A lonely, troubled individual who finds a community of like-minded individuals online and an outlet for their anger. “They’re angry and they’re suicidal and they’ve had traumatic childhoods and these hard lives, and they get to a point and they find something or someone to blame,” said Jillian Peterson, a psychologist and a founder of the Violence Project.

“For some people, that is women, and we are seeing that kind of take off.”

Fortunately, both articles also provide some solutions.

One particularly obvious step is depriving potential shooters of the means to carry out their plans.

The shooter in Dayton managed to kill 10 and injure 17 in less than 40 seconds primarily due to the fact that he had an automatic weapon with a 100 bullet magazine.

Another step is to try to make it more difficult for potential perpetrators to find validation for their planned actions.

I think we are all familiar with the old newspaper expression that, “If it bleeds it leads!”

But this is far from just a media problem.

We also need to, as a society, be more proactive.

Most mass public shooters are suicidal and their cries for help are often well known to others before the shooting occurs.

Proactivity needs to extend also to the traumas in early life that are common to so many mass shooters.

Those early exposures to violence need addressing when they happen with ready access to social services and high-quality and affordable mental health treatment.

Statistic also expose the myth that mass shootings are usually random.

In more than half of all mass shootings in the United States from 2009 to 2017, an intimate partner or family member of the perpetrator was among the victims.

But the current rush to address mental health is also a bit tricky. Now I am certainly not opposed to increasing funding for necessary services for those struggling with mental illness but merely “red flagging” those folks alone is not a solution.

Psychiatrists, however, say that the attention on mental health generated by mass shootings, and the common argument that mental illness is the explanation for these massacres, cannot account for the fact that many of the troubling behaviors that are exhibited by mass shooters such as misogyny, white supremacy — or other types of hatred — are not always diagnosable mental illnesses.

We cannot, in the end, fall for another fallacy that there is simply nothing that we can do.

Paralysis, or being overwhelmed or numb, though an understandable human responses are not good enough excuses. Nor do they help change things in the end.

We are far from impotent and especially, as a group, we are actually quite the opposite. Doing something positive, no matter how small, can actually be incredibly empowering. Our scriptures, time and time again, powerfully inform us that the antidote for fear is love.

Those who profit monetarily or gain political power from gun violence rely instead on fear. Fear is certainly a powerful motivator. But to live in fear I believe is a curse.

The words of Jesus and Paul that we read this morning challenge us to not only believe in the power of love but to harness this irresistible force by putting love into action. Following Jesus’ example of sacrificial love may be difficult, unpopular and it may not even stop bullets. But God’s love for us can even overcome our fears of dying. In the end it’s really all we got but it is more than enough. Because we know and have seen that Love works!

"I have told you all this so that you may possess my peace. In the world you're going to have troubles. But be resolute! For I have subdued the world!"

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510