

March 8, 2020
Dr Jane Florence
Text: Matthew 26:50-52
Title: “Jesus, a Pacifist”



Jesus was a Pacifist; what does that mean? According to Joseph L. Allen, professor of Christian ethics at Perkins School of Theology, a pacifist is not simply one who works for peace or values it highly. A pacifist is one who believes that it is always wrong to go to war. Does Jesus meet that definition? If we take his words seriously, if we take his life's teaching seriously, if we take his death seriously, I think so.

First of all, Jesus was a Jewish prophet. Jewish prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah, have a vision of world peace- where the wolf and lambs lie side by side, and calf and lion both together, and cow and bear... they will not hurt or destroy at all (Isa 11). Prophets envision when people “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks (instruments of war transformed into tools for living) ; and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.(Isa 2:4) (Micah 4:3) Israel's prophets seek peace. Jesus was a prophet.

Secondly, Jesus taught peace when he said, “do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matt 5:39) or “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44) or the admonition of the greatest commandment “Love God and Love one another’ or the text we just heard of a story told in all four of the gospels.

When Jesus is accosted by a “large crowd with swords and clubs” and they lay hands on him and one of his followers pulls out a sword and slices off an ear of someone grabbing Jesus. It could have turned into a bloody mayhem good guys against the bad. Jesus stops his disciple who attempts to intervene with violence and says, “put your sword back - for all who take the sword will perish by it.” As if to say, we won't become one of them by stooping to their violent ways. As if to say, retaliation is not the solution. The sword is not God's way. Jesus taught nonviolence- even in the face of his own survival, with imminent death before him violence was still not an appropriate response. Jesus lived and died a pacifist. He would rather die than take up arms.

Evidently, the early Church thought so too for at least the first 300 years anyway. Before 321 CE, no Christian writing approved of Christians' going to war.¹ In the first three hundred years of those committed to following the Way of Jesus, war was incompatible with Jesus' command to love. When Constantine rose to power as the Roman Emperor Rome had been persecuting Christians, but Constantine mobilized them instead. Battle shield's carried the sign of Christ cross into battle. Three hundred years after the Roman Empire executed Jesus; it triumphed in battle by turning his followers into Crusaders.

Crusaders justify war as a conflict between forces of good and evil. Crusader mentality maintains that God does not care about our enemies, but cares only for our side. The Crusader approach denies that all of us are good and bad and that all people (yes, even our enemies) are created in the image of God and that God is a lover of all. If we return to the life and teachings of Jesus and what it means to follow his Way of peace and

¹ Joseph L. Allen. *War: A Primer for Christians*. 1991.

nonviolence, we must take a hard look at ourselves, our culture, our nation and the choices we make in everything from entertainment to national leadership and laws- particularly those regarding guns.

We promote violence in our culture whenever we allow violence into our beings - into our psyche. When we allow violence to enter us, though our eyes or ears, it makes its way to our hearts; it takes root in our mind; it invades our souls. Whether by watching it on a screen, or participating in it, the violence becomes part of us. Whenever we cheer for one to kill/defeat another, we affirm violence as the solution. We feed aggression. We kindle a spirit of revenge, retaliation, conquest at any cost. The cost is huge.

When all that violence that we seep in constantly is unleashed, it is costly. Often, unleashed upon the innocent. The US has had 1316 school shootings since 1970. There are 300 million guns in the US today. An estimated 4.6 million American children live in a home where at least one gun is kept loaded and unlocked. The death toll for guns in the US in the last 40 years eclipses all wars ever fought by this country. ² There are roughly 32,000 gun deaths per year in the United States. Of those, around 60% are suicides.³

The statistics should be enough to bring about a change, but lists of numbers rarely do so. There are pictures: pictures of children's faces smiling sent off to school one morning after breakfast. Faces that their parents see no more. There are pictures of blood spattered classrooms. Pictures of people covering their faces and crying out in disbelief and shock. Pictures on nightly news. But pictures of strangers don't seem to change our laws either. There are stories of people we know or knew. How many of you know of a life that has been touched by guns? You can tell those stories.

I could tell you about Paul. He had dreams of a bright future. He was going to college and waiting tables while doing so. He was leaving the restaurant where he had just finished a late shift. The man who approached him to rob him got scared and shot him in the chest. Paul was a nice young man murdered at 21. Paul was my nephew.

I could tell you about Frankie although I really didn't know her all that well. She had dark hair and a pretty smile. She married in her 30s. Life was complicated. There was a war going on - not across the world, but in her soul. She wanted peace and couldn't find it. It was easy for her to buy a gun. It was easy for her to rent a hotel room by herself. It was hard to see my brother hurt so much when he got the call telling him his wife was found dead with a gun in her hand. Frankie was my sister-in-law.

I could tell you the story of a teenage boy in the church where I worked while in seminary. He skipped school with a friend one day. The boys found the father's service revolver. We don't know the details of what exactly happened. I got a phone call telling me to go to Parkland Hospital in Dallas. There was a 16 year old boy with a bullet in his brain, and his father was threatening suicide if his son didn't survive. Two lives hung in the balance of that bullet.

I could tell you the story of one of the kindest men I've ever met. His life was forever changed December 5, 2007 when a young man carrying a gun walked into the south doors of Von Maur at WestRoads Mall. But I'll let Fred tell you his own story sometime. He will mention the nine who died that December day. He always remembers them.

² bbc.com/Guns in the US: The statistics behind the violence. 5 January 2016

³ Dustin Hawkins. "Putting Gun Death Statistics in Perspective" August 1, 2015.

In spite of all the names of the 30,000 lives taken each year, and all the pictures of the victims and their families who suffer long after, and all their stories, our country still pays homage to the Gun Empire and holds fast to a misquoting of the Second Amendment as though it were a Ten Commandment from Mt Sinai. Oh wait, one of those says, 'thou shall not kill.' **Let's not confuse an Amendment to our Constitution with a Commandment from God.**

Whether it is global warfare or a right to keep firearms in our possession, there is more than a political component to the debate on guns in our nation. There is a theological aspect that must be considered for people of faith. Gun regulations are not just a political topic; gun regulations are also spiritual matters. Guns are about life and death. Life and death is pretty spiritual. If we believe everybody is made in the image of God, killing an image of God (friend or foe); that's pretty spiritual. When people are gunned down at work or movie or mall or school, when mourners line streets and fill funeral homes, it becomes spiritual really fast. When violence takes innocent lives; it's our spirit that aches for a new order, for a peaceable kingdom.

James Atwood writes a theological expose about *America and Its Guns* in which he likens guns to idols. Idols are those things we worship. Idols are that which we have faith will save us (salvation), that which we pledge our unending devotion and defend to the death. We trust our idols to protect us, conquer our fears, and destroy our enemies.

We are a people worshipping guns that we think will keep us safer- even though data contradicts the notion. We are a people becoming more and more violent. We are a people becoming more and more distrusting and fearful of one another. We are a broken people who allow anger to spew forth and kill the innocents of our world. A right to house a gun is valued more than the life of children in our schools.

I grew up with guns in our house. My dad was a hunter; that meant there was venison in the freezer. I am a pretty good marksman; that means those tin cans perched on the fencepost didn't stand a chance. But neither of us needed an assault weapon for a deer or tin can- no one does. You and I had to wait till we were a certain age- 16 years old -and we had to pass a drivers test to determine if we could demonstrate safe driving before we were handed the keys to a car. And I had to pass psychological test and background screens of all sorts just to stand here as a UMC clergy. You probably had to for your work too. Why would we not have more stringent requirements for gun ownership?

Jesus said, 'if you live by the sword, you will perish by the sword.' We are perishing in the violent world we have created. In denying the mental healthcare needed and the easy gun access granted, we are certain to perish by our ways. In devaluing any human life, we diminish our own. In ignoring the Way Jesus taught, a Way of nonviolence and peaceful resistance, we mock the God we claim to worship.

Recently, three bills pertaining to gun safety were open for public comment before Nebraska law makers. About 400 gun rights advocates against the bills appeared for the public hearing including at least two people openly carrying semi-automatic rifles. The newspaper published a photo of one young man that I find ironic- even appalling. The chain he wears around his neck was on top of his t-shirt brandishing a semi-automatic weapon. A cross lie atop the weapon on his shirt. The bills sought to protect victims of sexual violence and harassment from gun violence, and another to prevent suicides using firearms. There were less than a dozen supporters of the bills present. While 80% of voters support some of

the measures included in these bills, nothing will be done this year in Nebraska on gun control legislation as they failed to advance.

I would beg to differ with the young man wearing a Christian symbol hanging on top of an image of a semi-automatic weapon. Those two symbols do not go together. We must think carefully about guns if our faith teaches that all life is sacred. We must seek wisdom and courage and strength. We must advocate our convictions to influence government policy, and educate in ways of peace, and remove the models of violence that exist in our homes in this nation. We must vote courageously for candidates who will have the courage to lead in the way of Peace. We must bring forth the peaceable kingdom because Jesus told his followers to sheath their swords and remember him.

May it be so.