

February 18th, 2018

First Sunday of Lent, Year B
The Rev. Rob Fisher
St. Dunstan's, Carmel Valley

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; Mark 1:9-15

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

I had some time to be at home yesterday morning, and I was observing our puppy. She's six months old now, so she's an adolescent dog—and perfect in practically every way (like all dogs on this peninsula.)

Sarah, Zoe and I were all busy doing other things, but she wanted to play. Being a dog, she's a pack animal, and she wanted to be close to the other members of the pack, which is us. She went from person to person, and when we wouldn't stop what we were doing and play with her, she went to her last resort, which was the cat.

They were an odd couple. She tried to snuggle against the cat, who was completely uninterested in closeness. The cat just wanted to sit in the sun by herself. Cats are not pack animals.

I think one of the reasons so many of us love dogs so much is that they remind us who we are at our best selves.

And when we're our best selves, we know that our lives are intertwined with the lives of others.

A few weeks ago I spoke about a very special word called "Ubuntu." It comes from southern Africa, and is a favorite of Bishop Tutu.

Ubuntu cannot really be translated perfectly. We don't have an exact word for it in English. But it means something like: "I see you."

Or, some describe it as meaning "I am because you are."

It means recognizing how my life is related to your life, which is a deeply Christian concept. Ubuntu is the way of the Gospel. It is knowing that we are in this life together, and we need to care for each other the best we can.

This happens to be all across the texts for this morning, but the word we get is not Ubuntu, but the Hebrew word *berith*, which is translated "covenant."

A covenant is a mutual promise. A covenant is something that does not just happen, but it is a choice. It is to choose relationship.

Like a "marriage covenant."

It can be between humans or groups of humans, or it can be between God and us. And in those cases especially, a covenant will sometimes come along with a sign.

A covenant is a sacred thing

In the story about Noah that we heard this morning, when the flood is over, and God makes God's promise with humankind and all living creatures—the sign of this "everlasting covenant" is a rainbow.

We hear of another covenant in the psalm, which ends with the verse:

All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies

In the Gospel, where we hear about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness—which, by the way, is the archetype of Lent—Jesus is tempted for forty days.

This points to the forty *years* in the wilderness of the Israelites.

We don't learn what the temptations are in the Gospel of Mark, which is very succinct, but in telling of this same story in Matthew and Luke we learn that each time the devil tempts Jesus it is to get him to do something that would be a smaller, more selfish good for Jesus, which would be opposed to the greater good for the world.

The devil tempts Jesus, who is hungry, to turn stones into bread, a miracle of selfishness, but Jesus responds that humankind does not live by bread alone.

Another temptation is for him to show off his powers, leaping from the top of the temple and being saved, but Jesus refuses that, too.

Finally, the devil tries to get Jesus to bow down to him, saying that he'll reward Jesus with kingdoms of splendor. But Jesus refuses to be tempted by that, too.

Each of these temptations holds an allure for Jesus, some sort of benefit that would come to him. But he refuses each one because he knows that to turn toward the devil would be to turn away from his Father, and to turn away from us. Jesus knows about his covenantal relationship with all of us, and he chooses that.

Jesus chooses a beautiful, self-sacrificial and covenantal way. And doing so, shows an example for us to do likewise.

We need right now to reclaim our covenant with one another in a new way in this country. We need to remember that our lives really are intertwined.

It is interesting how when we see footage after a tragedy like we had on Wednesday, it moves our hearts. What's that about? We don't know those people personally, but when we see their tears and the anguish they are going through, it touches us. We remember the deep wisdom of the Gospel, which is of mutual care, and of Ubuntu.

And for me, there is a sense of responsibility that cannot be separated out. We may not live in the same state as they do, but we have a shared social

contract as Americans. This accident was not a natural disaster.

I spent most of yesterday researching, because I realized that I need to learn more about the realities of gun violence. I have cared about this issue forever, but I have not done much about it, nor have I studied it very deeply.

I'll tell you, the place that my mind goes every time one of these events happens is a conversation I had with a friend a few years ago. He's the husband of an old college friend, and they live in Connecticut with their beautiful daughters. He's also a mortician.

When Sandy Hook happened, they did not have enough morticians to take care of all those little bodies. They asked him if he would be so kind as to lend a hand. With his own children being the same age as the victims it's hard to imagine how hard that must have been, but he helped.

For his part, that was an example of Ubuntu, also.

I thought that after Sandy Hook, something would change.

But it's like the definition of insanity—which is so apt to this situation—which is to do the same thing over and over and expect different results!

We've done the same thing on this issue over and over, which is essentially *nothing*, and so it is no surprise that the results are the same.

In reading up on everything yesterday, I was also struck by how emotional this issue gets. There is, by the way, such a thing as “emotional tension” vs. “creative tension.” And the latter is the one that turns out to be more constructive most of the time. When we get emotional, especially when we get divided into “my side” vs. “your side,” we definitely get stuck as a country. One side thinks that liberals want to take all my guns away. And the other side thinks that the NRA actually *wants* to see children die.

I believe that we really do need to see hearts change on this issue, but we can't change the hearts of others by calling those people thieves of guns on the one hand, or killers of children on the other.

So I turned to the evidence that I could find, because I like the idea of addressing gun safety in an evidence-based way.

We address car safety in an evidence based way, and we saved a lot of lives.

We address drug and alcohol safety in an evidence-based way.

But gun control, for some reason, is harder.

When I looked to find honest, well-intentioned, fair-minded, evidence-based thinking on this issue, I found that the evidence shows something very simple: more guns means more gun deaths.

Here's an interesting fact: Americans are 4.4 percent of the world's population, and we own 42 percent of the world's guns.

One study on the trends of gun violence by [Adam Lankford](#), a professor at the University of Alabama, cited by Max Fisher and Josh Keller in the New York Times, took account of other factors beyond prevalence of guns. It looked at, for instance, mental health, video games, racial diversity, social cohesion, immigration and diversity.

Not that surprisingly, it found that the biggest factor was prevalence of guns, and access to them. It's not actually that complicated. There will be outliers, but look at the total evidence and this is what you'll see.

And the numbers of deaths are high. We have about 20,000 suicides every years. (Because guns are more effective than other means, our prevalence of guns means more suicide attempts in America end in fatality.)

Homicides are about 10,000 every year.

And what really gets me is this statistic, that deaths from accidental discharges of guns are 500 per year! That's more than one death a day from guns just accidentally going off.

By comparison, annual deaths from guns in Japan are around 12 or 13 people, in total! Japan has half the population of the U.S.

There are so many more statistics, and plenty of nuance, but the truth is right before our eyes. So many of the excuses to not do something about this are just smoke and mirrors.

I was a Boy Scout, which I'm sure is no surprise to anybody! But when I was a kid I begged my parents to get me an air rifle, and the day I got it I was so happy. I shot a lot of cans in the backyard. In Scouting, I did the rifle merit badge and spent happy times at the shooting range at the summer camp where I worked. I learned that with power comes responsibility; and that guns are powerful, so we have to treat them with great responsibility. This is my view, and I think it is part of our covenant to one another, to find ways that are sensible and responsible. We will never eliminate most guns, like is the case in Japan. But why not start smaller, like with universal background checks, which 90% of Americans support? Why not remove access to military-style weapons that are the favorite choice of mass killers?

It is covenantal that we do what we can.

I was not surprised when I learned of this massacre on Wednesday, and if we do nothing, I will expect another similar event any day now. My only surprise will be if we do nothing and see no more massacres.

This may be a tipping point, or maybe that will happen after the next shooting, or the next. In the end, though, we are *not* powerless. It really is up to us, if we have a voice.

A little sacrifice on the part of some is worthwhile for the benefit of others, because we are committed to one another. We are not islands. Each of our lives touches the lives of everybody else. That's the gospel. That is what it looks like to live in covenantal relationship with others, living out the way of Ubuntu, something Jesus asks of us.

I want to say a final word in defense of prayer at this time.

There are been a lot said recently about the phrase "thoughts and prayers." Here's what my friend Lizzie Calogero wrote after the Las Vegas shooting:

"Praying isn't wishing. It's not just saying to the ceiling 'I'm sorry for those poor people over there, I hope things get better for them.' Real prayer changes you, it sets your intention in a deep way. I keep seeing folks, even my people of faith, talking about praying like it's empty air, and that makes me uneasy. If prayer isn't a regular part of your life, I can understand dismissing it; it doesn't look/sound like much....Prayer opens you up, it clarifies a whole bunch of [stuff] for you. People avoid prayer (talking bout myself here) because sometimes you don't WANT that kind of clarity!! We need to keep pushing for action, but dissing prayer in the process is folly. It might not be your thing, but understand what you're talking about. If you get centered and quiet, humble yourself, and listen for the current of Love that runs this universe, you'll get active [very soon]. It's not a passive thing."

I am praying with all my heart for those killed, those wounded, those grieving or traumatized, and those who are fearing the next mass shooting. I am also searching my soul for what actions I can do to stop this from happening again. I hope you will do so as well. Action and prayer are best together.

—Amen.