

Sermon for May 29, 2022 – Pray and Act

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Please be seated.

These past two weeks I have felt angry, helpless, and heartbroken. I'm sure each of you have your own list of emotions to describe how you have felt in the aftermath of the shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde as well as all the other mass shootings that have preceded them. Seeing the faces, reading about the lives, and learning the names of those who were murdered in Buffalo and Uvalde has brought me to tears, to prayer, and to action.

As the names of those murdered became known, I thought of the baptismal service wherein the newly baptized person becomes known to the church by being named three times. The first time the celebrant says, "The Candidate(s) for Holy Baptism will now be presented." And the parents and godparents joyfully say, "I present 'name' to receive the Sacrament of Baptism." Those baptismal candidates are named again when the celebrant says "*Name*, I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen*." And later "*Name*, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. *Amen*." No matter how many baptisms I attend, I always find such joy in this service where we acknowledge the person being baptized by name as being Christ's own forever.

The joy I find when a baptismal candidate is named in the service is a bitter contrast to heartbreak I feel when I learn the names of those lost unnecessarily to gun violence in Buffalo, in Uvalde, and in so many other places. In a world where we are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, where we are called to love one another, where God sacrificed his only son to offer us forgiveness and salvation, we still experience such evil and destruction.

It's enough. Isn't it? Nineteen children, two teachers, ten people grocery shopping: all dead. Did you know that since Columbine in 1999 there have been 229 mass shootings at schools and many more in other places? Isn't it time for each of us to stand up and take action to stop the abomination of mass killings?

Some of you may be uncomfortable right now hearing a sermon about gun violence. Some of you may think that this is an inappropriate topic for church. I am not asking you to agree with me, but I ask you please to keep an open heart, an open mind, and open ears. I recognize that this is a politically divisive issue. There are people who believe that this can be solved with stronger gun control such as background checks, licensing for carrying guns, training for people who have guns. There are others who believe better mental health care will help to prevent gun violence. My friends, it's not one or the other; I believe it is both and more.

This week Fr. Michael Bamberger, of the Church of the Ascension in Sierra Madre, California, shared this

The issue around gun violence is so complex and multi-faceted. Like so many issues in our society, it has become deeply politicized and can be a source of great dividedness. People of good will find it hard to talk about gun violence.

I hope we can model listening to each other. A good place to begin is to ask each other how we are feeling in the wake of these tragedies.

And we need to get up from our own sense of being paralyzed and commit to some action. It is hard and somewhat daunting to even know where to begin. But as the old riddle goes – “How do you eat an elephant?” “One bite at a time.” Listening to each other is one starting point. And it never hurts to pray.

Today we heard in the gospel reading about the ascension of Christ to heaven, his final words to the disciples, and that afterwards they “returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.” What did they do next after they had worshipped and prayed? They answered the call Jesus had given to them. They acted.

Following Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles, each of the apostles went out and acted in the name of Jesus. The apostles lived the Good News. The apostles acted in the name of Jesus. You might say that this was not an easy choice, however I believe that their love for God and their love for God's people made it an easy choice to go out in the world and act. They faced hatred. They faced oppression. They faced beatings. They were jailed. They risked their lives constantly all for the love of Jesus and Jesus' people. Despite all of this, they were willing to act in the name of Jesus and proclaim God's radical message of love. The message of love that they and each one of us is called to proclaim and to live every day.

I call each of us who are followers of Jesus, who are part of the Episcopalian branch of the Jesus movement, part of the Way of Love, to be like the Apostles and to raise up our prayers and then stand up and act. We need to act now to stop gun violence. A pandemic, economic uncertainty, mass shootings, hateful rhetoric, war, and an inability to love as Jesus calls us to love has made our world more divided, more angry, more traumatized. The world needs the followers of Jesus. It needs us to pray and to act. We can pray this morning and this evening and then we can act to try to prevent another tragedy.

The great theologian Henry Nouwen wrote

Prayer and action can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the

poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, they will always give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ.

Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of a compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian. Such acts do not stand beside the moments of prayer and worship but are themselves such moments. Why? Because Jesus Christ, who did not cling to his divinity, but became as we are, can be found where there are hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, and imprisoned people. Precisely when we live in an ongoing conversation with Christ and allow the Spirit to guide our lives, we will recognize Christ in the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden and will hear his cry and respond to it wherever he is revealed.

The Episcopal Church offers a number of resources and things that you can do to act to end gun violence. You will find them at the end of the digital version of my sermon that is posted on the Christ Church website. I urge you all to read them. I urge each one of us to pick one thing that you might do to help end gun violence in our world. If you believe that changes to mental healthcare can make a difference, then volunteer or donate to help support mental health programs such as the Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center or Sheppard Pratt or advocate for more mental health funding. If you believe that gun control laws will make a difference, write to your legislators or volunteer to speak at hearings. If you want to prevent another young person from feeling angry, alienated, and isolated from the world to such an extent that they commit mass murder, volunteer in school mentoring programs, or Big Brothers and Big Sisters, be a Scout leader, help with vacation Bible school this summer or at one of the camps at Claggett Center. Be present in the lives of the children in your family. These are only a few things that one can do to help make change, so no more families need to grieve lives cut short by violence.

+David Reed, the Bishop of West Texas, wrote to his diocese shortly after the shooting at Robb Elementary:

What we have to offer is ourselves. To turn ourselves, our hearts and minds, to those who are suffering in Uvalde – to reach out our hands to lift up and to extend our arms to embrace – *this* is what we have to offer, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and following him in whatever ways are available into the pain and brokenness of our brothers and sisters in Uvalde and at St. Philip's Church. We have received power to love and to resist hatred.

And we can pray. We must pray. Ignore the cynics and pray with all your heart. Let your cries reach to the heavens. Let your anger and despair be your prayer. And listen to God answering in return. Look for God's tears revealed and listen for his perfect and righteous anger. Give yourself over to opportunities to join in the Spirit's work of binding up and healing. Love with all you've got, and never, ever surrender to the darkness.

Let us pray this morning for the lives lost in the last two weeks in Buffalo and Uvalde and come this evening at 7 PM to pray during our prayer vigil. And then on this weekend dedicated to the memory of those who gave their lives for this country through service in our military, let us also act in the service of God and for the people of God.

Let us pray for those who have lost their lives.

God of peace, we remember all those who have died from gun violence and especially today for

Those who lost their lives at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas

Nevaeh Bravo, 10
Jackie Cazares, 9
Makenna Lee Elrod, 10
Jose Manuel Flores Jr., 10
Eliahna Amyah Garcia, 9
Irma Garcia, 48
Uziah Garcia, 10
Amerie Jo Garza, 10
Xavier Lopez, 10
Jayce Carmelo Luevanos, 10
Tess Marie Mata, 10
Maranda Mathis, 11
Eva Mireles, 44
Alithia Ramirez, 10
Annabell Guadalupe Rodriguez, 10
Maite Yuleana Rodriguez, 10
Alexandria Aniyah Rubio, 10
Layla Salazar, 11
Jailah Nicole Silguero, 10
Eliahna A. Torres, 10
Rojelio Torres, 10

And those who lost their lives at Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, NY

Celestine Chaney, 65
Roberta A. Drury, 32
Andre Mackneil, 53
Katherine Massey, 72
Margus D. Morrison, 52
Heyward Patterson, 67
Aaron Salter, 55
Geraldine Talley, 62

Ruth Whitfield, 86
Pearl Young, 77

May they rest in peace and rise in glory. Almighty God, hear our prayers and open our hearts to act in your name for the glory of the Kingdom of God and in service of the love we have for you and our neighbors. Amen.

Resources of the Episcopal Church to combat gun violence

The Episcopal Church <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/resources-to-respond-to-gun-violence/>

Bishops United Against Gun Violence <https://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/>

Mental Health Resources in our Community

Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center <https://www.grassrootscrisis.org/>

Sheppard Pratt <https://www.sheppardpratt.org/>

Sheppard Pratt Outpatient Mental Health Center in Columbia

<https://www.sheppardpratt.org/locations-directions/details/outpatient-mental-health-center-columbia/>