

## “Guns and Faith”

Date: July 27, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 26:50-54; Matthew 5:1-12 Theme: Guns, violence

Occasion: Sermon series, social issues

Almost every morning when I read the newspaper there is another story of violence involving guns. At times it's a story about a tragic, accidental shooting where a child or a friend wounds or kills a relative or a friend. Sometimes it's a story about a crime taking place. Other times, it's a story about a person using a gun in self-defense.

In America, we have a love-hate relationship with guns. Some people *hate* them, because of the violent and deadly power they possess. Someone they know or love has been injured or killed. Or perhaps they are righteously angry because of the increasing numbers of children and youth being killed.

Others *love* their guns, because they enjoy the sport of shooting, or hunting, or simply because they want to be able to protect themselves or their loved ones. The second amendment of the Constitution gives people the right to bear arms. Since the founding of our country, we have treasured the right to own guns without our government taking them away from us.

We are deeply divided on this issue. Our United Methodist Church has passed resolutions dealing with gun violence at the national level. I'll share with you in a few minutes what our position is. However, at Annual Conference in Western Pennsylvania, we rarely have passed any resolution dealing with gun violence – not because we don't care, but because of a very strong base of gun supporters.

Many of you in this congregation own guns, and are proud of it. Many of you in this congregation are terrified of guns and would never think to own a gun, and wonder about the intentions of those who do. What is a Christian to think? As we so often ask ourselves, “What Would Jesus Do?”

Let us first turn to the Scriptures for guidance. Once again, the testimony is divided. In the first lesson, from Matthew 26, we read about the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter draws a sword to defend Jesus. Jesus tells him to put it away. He goes on to tell the disciples that those who use the sword will die by the sword.

He also says, if He wanted to, Jesus could have called upon the power of Heaven and angels to defend himself. He had the power to fight back. But he chose not to use worldly power. He was not going to use force to fight force. Many have interpreted this passage to mean that Jesus was a pacifist, who both taught and modeled a non-violent response to one’s enemies.

When we turn to Matthew 5, from the Sermon on the Mount, we hear Jesus say, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” Many faithful Christians have interpreted these words to mean that we should not use deadly force in resolving conflict. We need to find alternatives to violence for making peace.

On the other hand, there are those who interpret these same passages differently, and they too are faithful Christians. In response to Jesus not using force in the Garden when He was arrested, some Christians argue that Jesus had a unique role as the Savior of the world. He was not going to resist the Romans, because it was God’s

will for Him to die for the salvation of sins. He was not going to defend himself, because dying was a part of God's will for humanity.

When Jesus told Peter to put his sword back in its place, He did not tell Peter to get rid of it forever. That would have contradicted what Jesus told them only hours before this. Luke 22:36: "But now if you have a purse, take it and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."

According to this argument, Jesus knew that the disciples were in danger and he wanted them to be able to protect themselves. And remember, the sword was the finest weapon available to an individual soldier at the time, the equivalent of a military firearm today.

But what about the passage when Jesus blessed the peacemakers? What about when Jesus said if a person strikes you on the cheek, then offer them your other cheek as well? Those who are not pacifists contend that this admonition deals with righteous personal conduct.

This was never meant to be a principle for governments to follow. Nor was it meant to be applied when a person's safety was being threatened. What Jesus was addressing was how a Christian should respond when he or she is insulted or slandered.

The question of returning an insult with another insult is a far cry from defending yourself against a mugger, a rapist, or a potential murderer. Many Christians will argue that it is perfectly acceptable to use force, even deadly force, to defend oneself or one's family.

Those who choose not to arm themselves with guns will sometimes use the argument they don't need to own a gun, because they trust that God will take care of them. The counter argument is

that we are not to tempt the Lord. Yes, God will take care of us, but we must do what we can do, to care for ourselves. We work to earn our room and board; we don't wait for these things to drop out of Heaven, though we say that we trust in God.

We also take the provisions of locking our house at night, and also our cars. We don't tempt God to protect us, when there are things that we can do for ourselves. Just as Jesus did not tempt God to protect him, when Satan urged him to throw himself off the top of the temple. Jesus replied, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

For many Christians, owning a gun for self-protection, or for the protection of their families, is simply being prudent.

Those who are opposed to the proliferation of gun ownership in America might then point to the numbers, to show why they are so concerned about gun violence in the United States. Eighty people die every day from guns in the US, 10 of these are children. Thirty-thousand Americans die from guns every year in the US.

Another statistic that is startling. The family handgun used for protection, is 22 times more likely to be used against a family member or friend than to stop an intruder. (The FBI)

Now, wait a minute, says the responsible gun-owner. Yes, the statistics are upsetting. But guns are not the problem. It's the people who own them. Guns do not commit crimes, people do. People need to be taught gun safety; people need to become responsible for themselves; and we need to enforce the gun laws we already have. We shouldn't blame the guns themselves, nor do we need more laws.

There are very good arguments on both sides of this issue. I can quote you scriptures that tell us to be pacifist and peace-loving.

I can also quote scriptures that talk about justified killing, particularly in self-defense. Some will even argue for capital punishment, based on scripture. I can find quotes that make a good argument either way.

What about tradition? Well, there is not a unified voice here either. There is a long history of Christian both using force, and justifying the possession of weapons. There are also many traditions, such as the Quakers and Mennonites, and also the Methodists, who have been pacifists when it comes to war, violence and killing.

The Church has a theory, though, called the Just War Theory, arguing there are times when it is morally just to use weapons to stop an evil force. However, there are also guidelines for the proper use and limits of weaponry and warfare.

If we appeal to experience, I have talked to people who have felt safer owning a weapon in their home, and I have talked to people who have experienced terrible tragedies involving guns that have changed their opinions about gun ownership and possession.

Certainly, in this country, there is a very strong voice, the NRA, that argues on behalf of gun owners. We cannot deny that their presence, power and influence have affected the way we think about guns.

Every time another tragedy happens, like Sandy Hook and the killing of 26 children, people react. What can be done to end the violence? Rightly so, we want our children to not only *feel* safe, but to also *be* safe – at home, at school, on the streets, anywhere. People are frustrated and looking for answers. Gun control is one response. But is it the only response, and is it the best response?

The United Methodist Church passed a resolution on Gun Violence in 2000, revised and adopted it again in 2008. It is still in our *Book of Resolutions*, published in 2012. It's a fairly lengthy document. So let me give you some highlights of our church's response:

“Violence, and more particularly violence to children and youth, is a primary concern for United Methodists. We recognize and deplore violence which kills and injures children and youth... Gun violence is killing children throughout the world, including the United States.... We call upon the United Methodist church to:”

It then lists 11 recommendations. Here are a few of them.

1. Convene workshops to determine the role of the church in helping to reduce gun violence.
2. Educate the United Methodist community on gun safety, violence prevention, and adult responsibility around gun violence prevention.
3. Identify and work with other organizations on this issue.
4. Develop groups to advocate for the eventual reduction of the availability of guns in society.
5. Support legislation to regulate the import, manufacturing, sale and possession of guns and ammunition by the general public, including provision for the registration and licensing of gun purchases and owners, background checks and appropriate waiting periods.
6. Discourage the graphic depiction and glorification of violence by the entertainment industry.
7. Seek legislation to provide assistance to victims of gun violence and their families.

Is this the final solution? Will this resolve our differences? Will all of us agree on what this says? No. But it's a starting place. And we need to start somewhere. Blessed are the peacemakers. May God guide us to find the way that leads to peace. Amen? Amen!