

We Must Do Better

June 11, 2023

The Church's Call to Prophetic Witness

A colleague recently told me that his youngest daughter has given up on finding a church. That can be hard when you're a 20-something, especially when you don't see many of your peers in the pews when you visit.

This young woman had moved to Chicago in 2021 after grad school. The churches she visited did fine on her scorecard regarding how they handled COVID. Their theology was good; my colleague, her father, would have clued her in as to what to look for in that regard on a church's website.

She told her dad that the reason the churches she visited left her cold was that none of them had anything to say about the great social ills of our time. It was 2021, a year after George Floyd had been murdered. It was Chicago, with its tragically high murder rate. Yet, as she visited church after church, she didn't hear mention of the church's call to combat racism or homophobia or poverty. Even though she was visiting churches similar to her dad's, she didn't find evidence of churches walking the talk. She said she and her friends were looking for a community committed to justice and involvement and significance, and she just hadn't found a church like that.

When her dad told me this, I joked that Green Bay is a mere three-hour drive from Chicago, and that she should check out Union. He reminded me that climate change is one of the issues she's passionate about, and so driving back and forth multiple times a week, wouldn't be in the cards.

Now friends, I honestly don't know how sincere this young woman's search for a church home was. She may have visited a time or two but spent most of her Sunday mornings doing what 20-somethings do. Nonetheless, her story is plausible. All too often, our churches are reluctant to take a stand, fearing that we will alienate someone, and risk losing not only their attendance but also their money.

Yet, this young woman's experience of searching for a church home has been rattling around in my brain. For seven weeks, our Building for Faith in Action Capital Campaign has been celebrating what makes Union truly remarkable.

Today, we're lifting up how Union doesn't shrink away from our role as a prophet. I'll be honest with you, when we set this theme in early spring, I didn't know where the Holy Spirit would lead this sermon. But after much study and prayer, after listening to the testimonials our church members have given over these past months and hearing how our church has made a difference around issues of housing and racism and immigration and homophobia, my prayer kept leading me back to the truth that one of the prophetic balls that our church has dropped is that of gun violence.

In retrospect, our fundraising consultant probably would have counseled us against lifting up the church's role as a prophet if he had thought this through. Prophets rarely make friends and often alienate. But the Holy Spirit is a tricky muse, and for the last several weeks it has been on my heart that what this congregation needs to hear today isn't a cheerleader patting us on the back

and telling us how great we are, but rather a prophetic witness inspiring us to the work that needs to be done. God puts a vision of what is broken and disordered into a prophet's heart, with the expectation that the prophet will speak that hard truth.

The Scriptures

Perhaps it all started when I read that, as of a year or two ago, gun violence had become the leading cause of death among children in this country. That's right. When auto accidents were the leading cause of death among children, we put safety measures in place. We mandated seatbelts. We mandated car seats and have continued to manufacture better and better ones. We got M.A.D.D. at drunk drivers. We spend oodles more on cars with better safety engineering.

What have we done to protect our children from guns? [Silence.]

My friend, Moishe Stiegman, is the Rabbi at Congregation Cnesses Israel over on Baird. He reminded me that Leviticus 18 tells us, "do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed" and that Deuteronomy tells us, "justice, justice you shall pursue." In the scriptures, when a word is repeated, it is an imperative. Deuteronomy is saying you HAVE to pursue justice.

But the scripture texts that kept coming to me this week are the Jeremiah text which David read and Jesus' parable of the persistent widow. In our passage from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah has just told God that he won't prophecy anymore. I like to imagine him putting his hands on his hips and saying, "You can't make me!" Jeremiah does this because it's not popular being a prophet. Prophets are people who God has given an insight into the brokenness of society, and who God has called to proclaim that if we don't change our ways, the consequences will be dire.

People are mocking and maligning Jeremiah. Who wants the guy at their dinner party who is always telling us that society needs to change, who is telling us that if we don't treat the people on the fringes of society better our social fabric is going to tear? Jeremiah says, "I'm sick of crying out 'doom and gloom' all the time." But it's barely a moment after that that he says that the Word of God is like a hot coal in his mouth, he cannot keep it in.

Friends, I want you to think of speaking out about gun violence like that, like it's a way too hot bite of food that, despite all propriety, you have to spit out. Being the person in your social circles who is known for bringing the mood down because of your anti-gun violence soapbox may not be what you want to be known for, but if it saves even one life, it will be worth it.

As of May 3, there have been 14,191 gun-related deaths in the United States in 2023. Of those, 6,073 were homicides and 8,118 were suicides. Eighty-eight were children under the age of 11, and 503 were children between 12 and 17.

The statistic that most strikes me, though, is, out of the 14,191 gun deaths in this country so far this year, only 360 (or 2.5 percent) were committed in self-defense. This means 97.5 percent of these gun deaths had nothing to do with protecting oneself or one's family. Furthermore, if the United States practiced common sense gun regulation like much of the rest of the world, there would be far less need for even that 2.5 percent, which is largely a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If the image doesn't work for you of speaking out against gun violence being like hot food in your mouth that you just can't keep in, perhaps Jesus' example from our Gospel will. There, we read of a widow who keeps going to a judge, asking for justice. In this parable, Jesus says that even though the judge doesn't fear God or respect people, they will grant the widow justice just so she won't wear them out. Here, Jesus is telling us that, as we strive to achieve justice, wearing our opponents down is just as laudable as changing their minds. Be persistent. Keep beating that drum. Change will come.

Conclusion

Friends, I have no cute story for you today. You know that I like to give you something hopeful to carry out with you. I've got nothing to make you smile or walk away feeling good today.

What I do have for you is this: Last summer, one of our church families was inches away from the massacre at the Highland Park, Illinois Fourth of July Parade. Nicole Polarek, Jason Ferry, and their three kids had just walked out of a favorite pancake restaurant, less than a block away from the condo they keep in Highland Park because Jason's work takes him down there so frequently. They had just stepped back to the stroller they had set out to keep their place on the curb only to have the people inches – not feet – inches in front of them mowed down by a man with a gun.

In trying to process this horror, Nicole wrote an essay about their experience. In it, she tells of the hours spent taking shelter in the restaurant stairwell:

Our brains realized the continued danger and shifted into autopilot as the minutes turned into hours.

- Triage. Stop the bleeding.
- Don't let that pregnant woman go into labor.
- Keep the doors locked.
- Get that person a chair.
- Rub the kid's back as he vomits.
- Get people water. Find crackers.
- Breathe. Scan the crowd.
- Keep checking on the wounded.
- Notice signs of stroke. Keep calm.
- Stay alert. Keep track of the littles.
- Make small talk.
- Share information between the people who can handle it.
- Console the grieving.
- Exude calm.
- Be a helper.
- Assure people as they ask repeatedly, "Am I going to die?"

If 88 children under the age of 11 being murdered in the first four months of this year isn't enough to motivate you to become a prophet on this issue, perhaps the horrors that one of our church families endured and continues to be traumatized by will.

What can you do?

- Take a stand. Speak out.
- Stop electing politicians who are beholden to the gun lobby.
- Stop electing politicians who do nothing.
- Run for office yourself.
- Speak out to those who spout the lies and half truths about self protection and the right to bear arms.

I'll leave you with this: we have a deeper obligation to our descendants than to our ancestors. We have a deeper obligation to the tens of thousands who are being killed than we do to an antiquated law. We've changed laws before. Now is the time for all people of faith to stand up and stop glorifying guns.

Nicole ends the essay that she wrote to try to process her experience of being in a mass shooting by saying:

“If you live in America, you will be affected by gun violence. Gun violence is coming for your safe zone, your school, your office, your bank, your grocery store, your favorite holiday, your concert, your parade, your kid. You can be caught in the crossfire of someone's bad day and left to deal with the loss and the cost. I don't have the answers, but I now have a story that could easily be yours.”

The only thing that is going to make a difference is the people of God taking a stand. We can – no, we HAVE to – do better.

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