

# “Hide and Seek”

*13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*Luke 9: 51-62; Matthew 5*

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From the Pulpit

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*Prayer of Invocation: Holy God, giver of life, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit. Silence in us any voice but your own. Open us to the work of the Spirit in this place. Amen.*

Today's text from the Gospel of Luke speaks to the "would-be followers" of Jesus. It is here in his journey that he sets his face to Jerusalem. Jesus sends his disciples out ahead of him, and they are not welcome. Jesus isn't welcome. But Jesus continues on. People find Jesus along the road who say they want to follow him, but Jesus challenges the notion of follower-ship. Jesus is abrupt. Time is of the essence. He is headed to Jerusalem, if they want to come along, they better get moving. There is no time to get their house in order, there no time to say farewell, the kingdom of God is at hand.

In Scripture, Jesus shows us a better way to treat the stranger, those who need welcome, and those who need healing. But there is only one place where Jesus sets his eyes---that is Jerusalem. And we know, for Jesus and for those "would-be followers", Jerusalem will be the place where Jesus will die at the hands of another, through an act of violence.

Last year at this time, I stood (here) in this pulpit after the church shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in

Charleston, South Carolina. In the face of personal and community tragedy, in a place where sanctuary and safety was challenged and changed forever, the disciples of Mother Emanuel AME found comfort in God's never wavering promises and everlasting love.

Last year, many denominations, called for the nation's political leadership, faith institutions and other organizations to face the reality that race and violence remain a problem in this nation. I didn't have words. I remember relying on words from Psalm 46 which reminds us in anxious times, that, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear."

A year later, I stand here two weeks after the recent tragedy at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. The largest mass shooting tragedy in our country's history, left 49 victims dead, 1 assailant dead and many more of the victims recovering in area hospitals, hundreds and thousands more who seek healing as survivors of this violence. I've been glued to the news events (of the last few weeks and this week in particular.) I am so sad. I am angry. Angry that another act of hate resulted in gun violence and the horrific loss of so many. Angry that family upon family is propelled into profound grief. Angry that, yet

again, we as a country face a fierce debate over guns and gun violence.

But I am encouraged, but courageous acts of bystanders and first responders and medical personnel. I am also encouraged by legislators who do not remain silent and risk for the sake of furthering the cause for justice. I am encouraged by people of faith who gather here and in this city and across the country to keep in the front of our consciousness---the issue of violence in this country.

Our family was out of the State of Ohio during the days after Orlando, and I'll confess-- I felt far away from this community of faith. I was proud to hear you gathered people of different faiths in this place to offer prayer and song and reflection. Worship reminded the gathered of God's presence and love and care for all of us. As I listened to the service, I was reminded of God's unwavering promise of love and comfort. I was encouraged that people of faith gather despite differences of opinion, grieve together, and worship a God who is first to weep and with whom we mingle our tears.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Mt. 5:4)

I am encouraged by the outpouring of love and support from so many in Columbus for the LGBT and Hispanic communities. The images from the Stonewall Columbus PRIDE parade are powerful reflections of life and love conquering fear and hate. But the image that caught me off guard was the young adult holding a pride flag that read, “**Stop Killing Us.**” It is a powerful image I won’t soon forget.

Jesus says: “You have heard it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, “**Do not resist the evildoer.** But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other side also...” There is a tension in those words that Jesus offers us, especially when our fears and phobias get the better of us. **It’s the challenge for disciples; it’s the challenge for communities, for people of faith.** How do we build communities of acceptance and mutual understanding? How can our communities speak out against hate and hateful actions that separate us from the love in Jesus Christ?

The Pulse Nightclub in Orlando is the corner of larger scene.

- 90 people die every day from guns in the United States, 7 are children<sup>1</sup> (National Center for Health Statistics).

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Health Statistics, 2016

- (This accounts for murders, assaults, suicides, unintentional shootings, police interventions)
- According to the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the cause of death of 32,000 children, women and men in the United States is a firearm. (2,300 are under the age of 18)
  - According to United States Department of Defense, more fellow citizens have been killed through gun violence in "peacetime" than have been killed in all of our nation's wars since 1776.
  - The FBI claims the family handgun purchased for protection, is 22 times more likely to be used against a family member or friend than to stop an intruder.

We must not hide from these numbers. Sure, the numbers grab our attention-they make the headlines-they shape the debate. But they are more than numbers-more than statistics. They are people with whom we share a national identity. They are filled with hopes and dreams and their own stories to share. They are people of faith, a variety of faiths. They are lives lost too early. We cannot hide from devastating effects of gun violence in our

country. We have to seek a better way forward. The ripple effect of gun violence is too great for us to remain silent.

Jesus says: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Mt. 5:9)”

Not one of us is immune to the impact of gun violence. It doesn't matter what community you live in — affluent or poor; urban, suburban or rural; black, Hispanic or white. No community is saved from the wounding. No community is free from the heart-numbing trauma. No community is protected from the hopelessness. Gun violence may be concentrated in certain cities and neighborhoods, but it is everyone's problem. It is a threat to the entire nation. And I think gun violence is a threat to our souls.

I am not a gun owner, but I am affected by gun violence. I stood with families whose loved ones have died because of gun violence. I served as a hospital chaplain as my pager went off at 2am for a Level 1 Trauma, a GSW (Gun Shot Wound) of a 14 year old. It's surreal.

This past April our family became survivors of gun violence. Our nephew Holden, age 29, completed suicide with a handgun. He served one tour in Afghanistan with the Army's 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, and he returned to the States to battle

the effects of war, PTSD, among other things. He was smart and funny and he had an infectious laugh. And the ripple of his loss continues for our whole family and his friends. When a thousand people come to calling hours and the service, they too become survivors of gun violence. It, too, is surreal. The ripple effect of gun violence is too great for people of faith to remain silent.

The Bureau for Justice Statistics and the American Psychological Association has documented the ongoing effects of trauma for gun violence survivors. The American College of Physicians recommends that we approach firearm safety as a public health issue in this country.

- One in 3 people in the U.S. knows someone who has been shot.<sup>2</sup>
- More than 1 in 5 U.S. Teenagers (Age 14-17) reports having witnessed a shooting.<sup>3</sup>
- The cost of gun violence in the United State (Medical treatment, criminal justice procedures, reduction in

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<sup>2</sup> Goss, Kristin, "Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control," Princeton University Press, 2006. p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Source: [Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Study](#), p. 6, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, October 2009

quality of life for victims and families) can reach over \$228 Billion annually.<sup>4</sup>

**These statistics weren't in my head** a week ago. Life is busy. Lots of things are happening. I get focused on the next thing. But the events of Orlando, the events on the floor of the House of Representatives this week, stopped me in my tracks. As a person of faith, I choose to engage all of this with you as a community of faith. As a Child of God, there is this tension of the journey toward abundant life that God offers us and the senseless acts of violence among us, in our homes, on our streets, in the world. These issues that tear apart our families and communities and countries are issues of faith.

A few years ago, I found a list of words about Guns and Violence in our language. I helped me frame why it is important to change the language we use. Maybe that is one way that **people of faith change the conversation**. I'll share a few, but know I have the list of 140 more, if you're interested. **"Big Shot, Trigger Happy, Shoot me an email. I dodged a bullet. He went ballistic. Bite the bullet. More bang for your buck. We killed them 42-0. I have a question? Fire away."** Since seeing this list, I am much more aware of the language I

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<sup>4</sup> The SandyHookPromise.org; MotherJones. What Does Gun Violence Really Cost? <http://www.motherjones.com/politic/2015/04/true-cost-of-gun-violence-in-America>.

use that references word of guns or violent actions in my own speech and I am seeking a better way forward.

Our Christian Education Commission has already planned a series in the fall around gun violence following the UCC resources. I give them great thanks for lifting this up for us to discuss and advocate for resolutions to this violence that affects us. **My fear is that life will get busy and I won't pay** attention to this issue as much as I have for the last few weeks. The routine of my life will return to its pace **and I won't stop** next time to read the names, to see the faces, to hear the stories of the victims and survivors. **That's my fear.**

The United Church of Christ has had an official position against gun violence since 1995, and its leaders have joined the ecumenical work for greater reform. In that it seems to me that the Christian community has the message of healing to share with each other and the world. So many thousands continue to grieve, lives lost and futures shattered, and when we gather as a community of faith-we share the healing stories of Jesus Christ and the power in learning to live differently.

The UCC posted on Facebook today, “How We Heal” from writer Mary Luti.

*The truth about human beings is that we're broken. The larger truth is that we heal. The even larger truth is that we heal each other. We have the power, often by the simplest of acts, to help each other heal. ....Jesus didn't heal everyone, but he showed us the new kind of life that can be ours when we don't retreat into one-person worlds. And he gathered the church as a circle of care to give that life away, hand to hand, heart to heart. It's how we heal—by the company we keep.<sup>5</sup>*

church and the story of God's people offers a glimpse of light and hope into a community and world that is hurting and hopeless. Healing and hope, and eternal life come from the One who himself would die from violence, but he came to show us all a better way forward.

May the healing love of Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) june 25, 2016, Facebook. Mary Luti.