

“CALLED TO ANOTHER WAY,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 29, 2022

Congregation, what’s again happening? What’s going on? This past week and the week before the news has been horrific. Just last Tuesday, in Uvalde, Texas, an eighteen-year-old kid murdered his grandmother, then headed to a local elementary school where he stepped inside and started shooting, taking the life of nineteen children and two adults. Three additional children remain critically wounded.

Likewise, just nine days previously in Los Angeles, California, a 68-year-old man opened fire at a Sunday noontime church luncheon in honor of a visiting pastor. One of the members of the Geneva Presbyterian Church, a medical doctor, rushed the gunman as he started firing, successfully knocking the guy over. The visiting pastor then hit the gunman over the head with a chair, putting him out of commission and enabling other church members to hog tie their would-be murderer with an extension cord, as well as seize his two guns. But there was no happy ending. The courageous doctor died in the act of preventing total carnage. Five others were wounded, four critically. The shooter, who was ethnically Chinese-American, evidently bore a grudge against Chinese-Americans from Taiwan.

Meanwhile, in a Buffalo, New York grocery store, only a day before the church shooting---that’s just ten days before the Uvalde carnage--ten shoppers—mostly older, African American, church-going Christians--were killed and three others wounded by yet another eighteen-year-old gunman wielding an assault weapon. Adding to the vileness of it all, the shooter, who had driven two hours from Binghamton to Buffalo to stage his massacre, livestreamed it all and justified his attack by issuing a racist manifesto that he posted online.

Of course, what happened in Uvalde, Los Angeles, and Buffalo comes on top of other mass shootings which we are now regularly witnessing in American life. Metro Detroit has not been left untouched. In fact, our region might be considered close to Ground Zero. Thirty years back as our nation’s trajectory of mass violence was first sparking, a gunman’s attack at the Royal Oak, Michigan Post Office killed four and wounded four. If I remember right, the whole episode gave rise to that awful phrase “going postal.” Fast forward to a half a year ago in November 2021 when three students died and another eight were injured when a 15-year-old kid opened fire in the hallways and classrooms of Oxford High School. Can we even begin to imagine what residents of Oxford, Michigan are feeling right now as they assimilate these waves of grim news from Texas, California, and New York?

This terrible violence is hard to figure out—Isn’t it? In one of these cases, namely Buffalo, out and out racism fed the carnage. That’s been true in other spots across the nation and around the globe too. However, not every shooter is white and male, let alone a white supremacist. In Uvalde, Los Angeles, and Oxford, Michigan, for instance, more

intensely personal grievances seem to have held sway that are hard to discern. Also, while the shooters do mostly tend to be in their teens to twenties, they are sometimes far more senior in years and no less violent for that fact. That Geneva Presbyterian church shooter was close to 70. Likewise, the Las Vegas Music Festival sniper, who in October 2017 killed 60 people and wounded another 411 with a rain of 1,000 bullets, was 64 years-old.

Indeed, if we look overall, we begin to see that the biggest common denominator in these mass shootings is not race, ethnicity, or age. Instead, it is mental illness or a sociopathic disposition, coupled with ready access to high-powered guns—so-called assault weapons.

To be sure, the mental health issues loom huge. At the same time, maybe, just maybe, we need to ask who's the most crazy here? What is it about our culture today that spawns such violent acting out on the part of those who are emotionally disturbed? And why is it that we ever allow assault weapons to fall into their hands, creating such deadly hazard for us all—not only in schools but all our public places?

We hear much talk today about the sanctity of life, particularly as legislatures across the nation pass bans on abortion. Yet in America right now guns seem to be most sacred of all. We can't seem to say "no" to them or "yes" to sane restrictions on the most dangerous and lethal weaponry which, as many police chiefs have noted, has no business being in civilian streets. Indeed, it is estimated that there are now more guns in circulation in the United States than our total population of men, women, and children.

Unfortunately, all these guns proliferate against a backdrop of considerable cultural turmoil and confusion. Let me list some of the things that, consciously or not, are unfolding before our eyes:

- A break-down of institutions, including church and family, and an accelerating lack of respect for authority;
- Greater social distrust fed by racism and a yawning gap between rich and poor with our billionaire class more conspicuous than ever;
- A general dumbing down of moral values with loss of a boundaries between what is appropriate versus inappropriate;
- A quickened pace of life made possible by a high-tech revolution, encouraging impulsivity over thoughtful reflection;
- A mass media that with its clever algorithms likes to manipulate our emotions and behaviors for profit;
- A loss of face-to-face or in-person community which makes it easier to distort truth and demonize others.

Some might call this a "perfect storm." I consider it an ongoing recipe for disaster which is not going to abate unless we are committed to doing something to combat these very real trends. Essentially, our nation is reaping what it is sowing. Every day such bad stuff happens is becoming a Judgment Day. Yet here and now we need to work on curtailing

what could be called a domestic arms race that is killing more and more people in America's streets, malls, and classrooms.

Fortunately, human decency is not completely forgotten. More folks than not still possess the remnants of what I would call a Christian conscience. They are able to keep a lid on their very worst instincts and impulses. They have the will to resist those selfish temptations that the crazier aspects of our culture lay in our paths. However, not everyone is quite so morally anchored. As we see in the case of too many trigger-happy men, young and old, even the rudiments of a Christian conscience can be absent. They have apparently grown up without a moral or spiritual check on any paranoid suspicions, fears, and anger that might fester. This certainly reflects badly on their parents and immediate families who have often have not imparted some pretty basic moral values about respect for human life, as well as love and forgiveness. Yet it also reflects poorly upon society at large which no longer thinks we need to reenforce a respect for life and other positive and caring moral values in the public square.

In a display of great selfishness on our part that is far from the spirit of Jesus Christ, individual rights—in other words, what *we want* and what *we will*—have come to be treated as more important than the common good and the general well-being of all. If we're genuinely Christian, we should know better. As Christians, we need to encourage everyone to keep personal, individual wants versus what best serves the common good in a careful balance. Ultimately, as any wise and faithful Christian will grasp, a healthy, vital society depends upon the willingness of its citizens to make sacrifices for the benefit of all.

In the realm of disease, COVID-19 has certainly shown that when even 70 or 80 per cent of a population has been vaccinated against a virus the whole population is more likely to be immunized against any rapid or serious spread. Yet if and when the numbers of those vaccinated dip below 70 per cent an epidemic is more likely to rage and become a plague. The same dynamic prevails in the realm of general social health and well-being too. Where too few people are morally and spiritually vaccinated we end up with a communal atmosphere or environment less capable of keeping our more troubled citizens in check. Indeed, a society that is more cold-blooded than caring and compassionate and which celebrates violence in its own media is more likely to incite the worst in those who are already prone to act out their anger in order to feel powerful.

My late mother, who raised four sons, was always concerned about the “weak link” in our family group. Without ever branding any particular son as the “weak link,” she put some restrictions on all of us to safeguard against temptations that one of us might find harder to resist. Did we four brothers, not knowing better then, resent and protest these blanket restrictions, considering them unfair? Yes, we did. But my mother's retort was “All for one; one for all.” In other words, we needed to look out for each other and be the guardians of one another's virtue and well-being.

That's the Christian way too as Jesus and the apostles make clear again and again. The Apostle Paul was particularly emphatic on this point. If something you are doing is going to cause someone else to sin, then stop doing it!

This came up in an argument in the ancient city of Corinth over whether it was kosher for Christians to buy discounted meat that had been ritually sacrificed in the name of a pagan God. Since Christians don't believe that pagan gods truly exist and also reject any magical notions, Paul contended meat just remains meat even if it has been given and sacrificed in the name of a pagan deity. Pagan prayers can't contaminate it. On the other hand, if consuming this meat offends fellow Christians, undermines their faith, and causes a weaker brother or sister to sin or be discouraged in faith, then, Paul argued, it's not a good idea to have anything to do with it. (*Acts 15:29; 1 Corinthians 8:4-13*) Yes, Paul's message is that we need to look out for one another.

As dedicated Christians and as patriotic Americans, we should each be pursuing some self-examination in the face of all those being murdered in mass shootings. What are we ourselves doing that might either directly or indirectly contribute to an American culture now breeding such killers? None of the glorification of violence that has become so widespread and well-patronized by culture-consumers like us is aligned with the spirit of Christ. Nor is accepting and tolerating anger, hatred, and violence as "normal" as too many people do.

Jesus Christ calls us to another way—a very different way. Nothing spiritually pollutes more than willful violence which is why Jesus calls upon us to turn the cheek, even when struck. This is also why Jesus counsels us to forgive, not just seven times, but seventy times seven. (*Matthew 18:22*)

In the exact same spirit, the Apostle Paul admonishes us to "Hate what is evil" and to "cling to what is good." He adds: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If at possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap coals on his head.'" Paul concludes by saying: "Do not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (*Romans 12:9-21*) This was Paul's way of saying that two wrongs never make a right. Have more beautiful, faithful Christian words ever been spoken? I don't think so.

No doubt we all have different solutions in mind for what is ailing our nation and world right now in the face of rampant violence. Yet, rather than arguing with one another about what to do, we need to put hearts and minds and hands together to work out some faithful, common sense answers. And let's not make the ideal the enemy of the good. For us as Christians we need to take stock in the importance of our church life shared. Worshipping Christ does matter. And as I emphasized last week, so does our church-going. We need to

be inviting more people into Christian life, beginning with our own family, our neighbors, and friends, gently encouraging and shepherding them in faith in every way we can. The kind of nation and world that lies ahead for all of us and our children depends on our willingness to do so.

Meanwhile, rather than letting themselves become another form of popular entertainment, our churches should be helping us grapple with the moral and spiritual challenges of our time. That includes standing up against those in American life who make a fetish out of guns, treating them as some kind of sacred objects that come with an inalienable—even capricious--right to buy, sell, and wield them however one might choose without regard to the safety and well-being of our society at large.

On this Memorial Day weekend, when we remember the terrible wars that were fought and the men and women who bravely fought them so that a just, enduring peace might be obtained, we need to reaffirm that the work of Christ is the work of peace. The Savior, who in the Garden of Gethsemane at the time of his own arrest ordered his apostles to put any swords away, calls us to be his peace workers. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” he declares, “for they shall be called the sons [and daughters] of God.” (*Matthew 5:9*)

Yes, the peace of Christ *is* work that we all need to take seriously and to take on every day. The violence of our days is something awful. At moments we may despair that anything can change it. Yet through Christ, the miraculous becomes possible. The one who calmed the tumult of a raging sea can bring calm to the life of our nation and world again if we put our faith in him and rededicate our lives to his way. (*Mark 4:35-41*) May we, holding fast to the good, strive every day to be Christ’s true disciples and evangelists in a vexed and troubled world. **Amen.**