

I began thinking about this sermon back around Labor Day, so naturally my mind was still on “rest”... the unofficial last weekend of summer. Yes, rest is so important to our health, and one of the books I had in my summer reading was by Tich Nhat Hahn, well-known Zen Buddhist teacher, called “How to Relax.” The image on the front cover is a Hammock!...I want to read a small portion of it, entitled “Being Peace.”

The world needs joyous and loving people who are capable of just being. If you know the art of being peace, then you have the basis for your every action. The ground for action is to be, and the quality of being determines the quality of doing. Action must be based on non-action. People sometimes say, don't just sit there, do something. But we have to reverse that statement to say... “Don't just do something, sit there,” in order to be in such a way that peace, understanding, and compassion are possible.

As you probably know, I love the emphasis in the Judeo-Christian faith also on prayer and “quiet time,” the “still small voice” that Isaiah speaks of, the “Be Still and Know” from the Psalms, and Jesus’ words “Come to Me and I will give you rest.” BUT... The time for action must always come, and now, perhaps more than ever with a polarized entire world, (not just our political turmoil), we need our faith to spur us into action, or at least louder proclamations of who we are as followers of Christ.

So another book in my summer reading, by Rev. Jim Wallis, that I will be quoting soon has a focus more on “doing.” Wallis has roots and still leanings of conservative Christian theology; yet he has spent much time in Washington DC as an activist for peace. He reflects one of the main points of the book of James, a favorite point of liberal-progressive Christians, that we are to be not only “hearers” of God’s Word, but also “Doers” of God’s Word. This of course is a focus of Christians who believe strongly in social action, how to bring our belief in God’s love for all, into the social arena. Liberal Christians such as most in the United Church of Christ, have always believed and worked for more social harmony, and have insisted that there

can be no peace without justice. “Justice” in the biblical sense is not about judgment, but about right relationships, equitable and fair relationships, freedom and opportunities for all. And to be “doers” of peace and justice, we need to always be asking ourselves “What can we actually DO” to create more peace, more harmony in the world? The Christian slogan of several decades ago is important: WWJD... what would Jesus DO? Jesus did say, Blessed are the peace**MAKERS**. Peacemaking is a verb! And the command to LOVE neighbor as oneself is also verb! We are called as followers of Jesus to help *transform* the world, yes, move the world towards peace and love.

Let me shift gears and focus the conversation now to another mass shooting, and reflect upon some words by Rev. Jim Wallis... regarding the issue of GUNS and gun violence. Rev. Jim Wallis makes the point that this is a **spiritual** problem. The purpose of a gun is to kill, which is directly opposed to the purpose of all spiritual paths; a true spiritual path seeks to help life to flourish, to help humans become fully alive! Moses said it clearly in the 10 commandments: Though shalt not kill! The prophet Micah said “Not by power nor by might, but by every word that comes from God!” Jesus said it clearly to his followers: “Put away your weapons... if you live by the sword, you will die by the sword!” Sure, some of the Bible stories of the history of Israel are about wars in the name of God, but the trajectory of the Bible, the progress of the Bible is clearly toward **nonviolence**, the goal of Peace. Here are a few words from Jim Wallis regarding guns:

He starts with news we probably need to remind ourselves about: *“Sandy Hook elementary School in CT (26 young children and teachers killed), Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parland, FLA(17 students and staff killed), Covenant School (private Christian school) in Nashville, TN, Uvalde Texas (19 children and 2 adults killed). Rev. Wallis cites stats that say “Guns are now the leading cause of death for children and teenagers.”*

The only pediatrician in Uvalde Texas stated that DNA tests were the only way to identify some of the children.

The horrors and carnage of mass shootings have not decreased; the Pew Research Center found that in 2020 there were 45,222 gun related deaths, more than any other year in American history. Schools departments now feel the need for “active shooter drills” and practice lockdowns, starting in kindergarten(!) It is insane, something must be done, but no one seems to know what to do.

Rev. Jim Wallis continues with this challenge for the Christian church. He says: *“It’s past time for faith communities to offer more than their thoughts and prayers! It is a moral and spiritual question. “Until we make gun violence a matter of faith, a violation of everything the Bible says about peace, shootings will continue. It is outrageous that some of the Christian nationalists among us are some of the biggest supporters of guns. What do Jesus’ words ‘blessed are the peacemakers’ mean to those who claim to be his followers?”*

Regarding stricter gun laws, Wallis points out that even conservative justice Antonin Scalia said: “It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever, in any manner whatsoever, for whatever purpose.” Wallis goes on to note that over 88 percent of Americans support universal background checks, as well as stronger ‘red flag’ laws to identify individuals with histories and mental health issues who shouldn’t have access to guns. (Anyone with severe mental illness, or any recorded history, even social media with violent statements should not have a gun!) And over 2/3 of Americans favor outright bans of automatic military-style weapons. Such a ban was implemented in 1994 and resulted in dramatic reductions of mass killings, but when the ban was lifted 10 years later, there was of a sharp increase in mass shootings.

Fighting the powerful and wealthy NRA and gun manufacturers seems hopeless and futile. But Rev. Wallis proposes the idea of state to state resolutions. Some states like Texas may go to the extreme of open-carry of weapons, or no minimum age to carry a gun. There is an age

minimum for drivers licenses and alcohol, yet no age requirement for guns? Many psychologists say that the young adult brain is not mature until age 25. Is it any wonder that many mass shootings are by people under 25?

States could pass stricter and stronger gun laws. No one is wanting to take away guns from hunters, or from responsible citizens who go through proper safety training, etc. But it just makes sense that it should be harder to get a gun, and it should involve responsible training. Common sense also would consider places like the UK and Australia, who reduced their senseless mass shootings to almost nothing by enacting very strict gun laws.

Rev. Wallis' challenge to the churches is to offer more than just thoughts and prayers after the fact, but to preach and teach about the *morality* of easy access to instruments of killing; it clearly goes against the value of Peace and Peacemaking in the Bible and in most faiths. He says, *"We have yet to see many congregations of faith enter this political battle with a message of faith... That needs to change, now."*

Can we do that? Can we say more loudly, more publicly, that Moses was about "Thou shalt not kill," and Jesus was all about "Blessed are the peacemakers!" As a moral and spiritual question, people of faith must have ideas about how to lessen the killings. I did bring it up recently with some conservative friends... There was at least some common ground, at least the agreement that military grade assault weapons should be banned for civilians. There was also much agreement about stronger parenting, since many of the shooters are teenagers! Perhaps this can lead to more agreement regarding "red flag laws." Mental Illness is very real, and regular viewing of violent videos then mimicking them is very real.

There ARE action steps we can take. Let's be about "thought, prayers, words, AND action" as James says, not just hearers of the word but doers of the word. Amen.