

Suffer the Little Children: An Open Letter Regarding the 16th School Shooting of 2023

*A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.
Jeremiah 31:15*

It is with sadness that the leadership of North Central California Presbytery writes this letter through tears and heavy hearts. Once again, into the very soul of our nation, gun violence has erupted. This week it happened in a Christian school in Tennessee, resulting in the tragic loss of three children, three adults, and the alleged shooter. This week, it was Tennessee, but this mass shooting represents the 16th school shooting in our nation since the start of 2023. Gun death is now the #1 killer of children and youths under 21 years of age in our great nation.

What are we to think and do as people of faith, followers of Christ? Scripture portrays Jesus with immense tenderness and welcome toward children, within a culture of the time that gave little regard for them. Jesus invited the children to come and though we do not know the content of his exchanges with them, scripture clearly notes his care of these young vulnerable members of the human community and even chastises his own disciples when they do not share such a value.

Our nation is as divided as it has ever been over the use of guns and the “right to bear arms.” How is it though, with the incredible loss of life due to gun violence, we do not also lift up the right of each person to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness? What of the rights of children to attend school in safety, to learn within a setting of support and caring, to be nurtured by family, teachers, and a society that values their very existence? To enshrine gun usage while those made in the image of God are killed in random acts of violence seems a faithless act and a denial of the God who created all human beings in God’s own image.

On the very day of the most recent school mass shooting in Tennessee, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, PCUSA, spoke poignantly and compellingly about this tragedy, noting the epidemic of gun violence and the grief we feel for the children and families impacted by this latest tragedy. He called upon lawmakers to recognize that the United States has become one of the most violent nations in the world and to, more stringently, regulate the gun industry. He also added:

It is not just a problem for the government. It is a spiritual problem, as well.

Every pastor needs to preach about this issue from the pulpit.

Ruling elders, deacons, members must call for action from the government.

How can we love one another when we are packing pistols to kill one another?

We have to be more vigilant in the church, and that means more than just preaching.

It means more than just taking back old guns through a buyback program.

– Rev. Dr. Herbert Nelson II

Alongside the 16 mass school shootings are an additional 130 mass shootings this year, alone, that have ripped across this country in stores and public spaces, churches and parks, community centers and local neighborhoods. How long? Through tears and the veil of grief, we lift up prayers for all those whose lives have been shattered by the brutal force of high-powered weapons. Prayers also that we might have

the courage and conviction to do more than merely weep. We invite others who also, once again mourn, to join our corporate grief and do the hard and holy work ahead, so that someday these acts will not dominate the news and continue bringing untold suffering to the heart of our nation. Those of us who comprise the body of Christ have a calling both to be a people of love and compassion, and also a people of justice and a prophetic voice, speaking truth to power and working for change that brings fullness of life, not more devastation and death.

Rachel is crying out, violence once again stealing the most precious gift God has given, the gift of life. How long will we, too, weep before we say “enough?” If not for ourselves, then for all the precious little ones we are called to love and tend.

Signed,

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