

Courageous Hope

in the Wake of More Gun Violence

Excerpts from a sermon delivered on May 29, 2022, in response to gun violence inflicting mass casualties in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas, by **The Very Rev. Steven L. Thomason**, Dean and Rector of Saint Mark’s Cathdral.

[...] I do not believe that doing nothing is an option for people of faith. We have something to say and do in light of the evil that lurks in our midst, so while I have nothing to offer that will inoculate you from the pain in this moment, I do want to say a few things about what can be done that will help us find our way, and I believe with all my heart that these endeavors are worthy of this moment.

Much has been said this week about the role of prayer in the wake of such tragedies. Some castigate prayer as a cop-out, as doing nothing substantive. Folks, prayer is hard work if we take it seriously—it requires time and intention, it requires vulnerability because we are asking God to inhabit the space of our soul wounds, it requires courage to ask God to change us and to change the world, it requires energy to be inspired to work for change with God. Prayer is not an excuse to do nothing; it is aligning ourselves with the Source of Love that we so desperately need in this broken hurting world. [...]

Second, there is a form of prayer that has been largely lost in modernity, but the provocative and powerful role it can play in our lives, especially in times such as this, is an important one to reclaim. Lament is a form of prayer that may seem on the surface to be simply an expression of sorrow, or perhaps anger, but it takes those emotions

that weigh on the heart in times of loss and orients them to God. Lament is a way of being honest with God, with ourselves and others.

Lament insists that things are not as they should be and can be changed. Lament emboldens us to the possibility of another way, but lament does not deny the harsh reality of what is. [...] And let’s be clear, friends, God can handle whatever we have to say in our prayers.

Thirdly, I want to say something about what we as people of faith must consider doing if this violence is to end. And here I am going to meddle in the political milieu of

feckless politicians whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent children once more. No number of red herrings about mental illness or arming teachers will sway me from the conviction that assault-style weapons have no place in the hands of civilians, and they should be banned. Here are three reasons why:

First, the Sixth Commandment (thou shalt not murder) takes precedence over the Second Amendment. I understand the purpose of the right to bear arms, born in late 18th Century America, as the new nation faced

the real threat of the British re-invading, which necessitated muskets in the hands of its citizens who stood ready as militia when needed. The US Constitution is a living document (amendments have ended slavery and given women suffrage), and the second amendment is not beyond reproach or potential revision or reinterpretation, even if that may be political pie-in-the-sky at this time. The authors of the Bill of Rights did not envision assault rifles with large magazines capable of killing dozens of fellow citizens, including our children, in a matter of seconds.

Secondly, I am a veteran of the United States Army, and I understand the role of weapons. I have fired M-16 rifles, M-50 guns, and semi-automatic pistols, all of which are designed to kill their targets, fast and sure. [...] I understand the presence of such weapons in the military. For the life of me, though, I cannot understand their place in the hands of anyone else, and certainly not the public. It is madness.

Thirdly, I am a southerner by heritage, which means I grew up in a family that hunts for food. I was given my first hunting rifle, a .22 caliber capable of killing small animals, when I was just 8 years old. I was a lousy hunter myself; I never enjoyed it, but I honor the tradition and the real need for such work in agrarian societies. That said, there is no assault weapon that has a place in hunting wild game; there is no sport in mauling the animal with multiple rounds, and so I find arguments that such weapons are used for the sport of hunting to be fallacious.

Now I know there are some in our nation who are suspicious of the government, people who believe their right to bear arms is their protection against tyranny. I am convinced that the grand design and greatest gift of our republic is that the ballot is the best weapon against corrupt power and cruel government, and it is precisely the tool we have now as we engage this work of safe gun legislation. The proliferation of guns has translated not to a more secure peace, but to the thousands of mass shootings we have experienced in our lifetime. It is a dim theory that suggests more guns make us safer, it



is morally bankrupt, and we must have the courage to demand a different way.

After Sandy Hook, interfaith clergy joined with civic leaders to form The Washington Alliance for Gun Responsibility, which in this state has seen major achievements in safe gun legislation. [Learn about the work at gunresponsibility.org.] It can be done, even nationally, if we take the long view, and resolve to work for change. Which is to say, there is hope. [...]

In my spiritual journey, I have discovered paradoxically that the human heart can hold deep sorrow and joy at the same time—it is the mark of a courageous heart to do so. [...]

Finally, let me say to you: be gentle with yourselves, and others; be courageous to hold sorrow and joy in your heart, gladden the hearts of those with whom you travel, be swift to love, make haste to be kind, let the Spirit guide you in these rough days, and as you are able, have sufficient hope to lament what is while also looking to a future where God’s reign of peace prevails, and put your energy there.

I am convinced that our witness to the God of life and love and resurrected hope will change the world. ♦



◀ Dean Thomason marches alongside other faith leaders at the **Interfaith Prayer Vigil and March Against Gun Violence** on June 2, 2022. Photo by Mark White.
▲ The Interfaith March began at Temple De Hirsch Sinai on Capitol Hill and ended at St. James Catholic Cathedral on First Hill. Photo by Michael Perera. (Dean Thomason offered a reflection at St. James; see photo, p. 7.)