

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

---

*1 Kings 19:1-15a*

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.*

*But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'*

*He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;*

---

Here we are. Again. Another mass shooting. Another group of innocent bystanders, this time mostly members of the LGBT community, were in the wrong place in the wrong time with a crazed individual with a legally purchased military style assault weapon, a weapon that has one purpose and one purpose alone - to slaughter human beings.

So here we are. Again. Yet again you and I are gathered in the wake of a horrific and tangible example of evil - and that's not a word that I use lightly. You and I are gathered here today as Christians seeking a Christian response. That is our job. We have been called together as the Beloved Community, the Body of Christ, and we must say and do *something*.

Now, some of you might prefer me to preach on an unrelated topic. After all, Shelter Island is a such a quaint, serene, beautiful island, secluded - or so it sometimes thinks - from the problems of the rest of the world. Why must we concern ourselves with such unpleasant topics? Haven't we heard enough about this in the news this week?

Well, I'll tell you why we must talk about this. We must talk about this because we are part of a global community, whether we like it or not. We are not an island unto ourselves. We are parts of the one Body of Christ. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us weeps, we all weep. When 50 people are killed in a nightclub and more than that are injured, we are all wounded. We are *all* victims of gun violence.

We must respond to this tragedy in the context of worship because, well, that's what we do. We worship to bring ourselves before God, to be nurtured and transformed by God's Word, and to be sent out into the world to proclaim God's Kingdom of peace.

But what exactly should our Christian response be?

The first response to the Orlando massacre is to pray. Pray however you pray, by getting on your knees by your bed, or by taking a walk, or drawing or knitting or cooking. Whatever it is that works for you - pray. Pray for peace. Pray for the 50 people - including the perpetrator - who lost their lives and for the many more whose lives have been changed forever. Pray for our politicians that they may make the right choices in strengthening our nation's gun laws. Pray for the first responders there and everywhere. Pray for the churches in Orlando that are on ground zero right now. Pray for the LGBT community that has been the recipient of such senseless and undeserved violence. Pray for the Muslim community that has, likewise, been the collateral damage of xenophobia. However, prayer cannot be the only step we take. While keeping victims in our "thoughts and prayers" is a noble practice, to stop there is an insult to their memory. Thoughts and prayers are of little comfort to the families of those who died in last week's shooting.

Therefore, our second response to Orlando should be repentance. That, too, is a word that I do not use lightly. I believe that a Christian response to last week's events involves repentance because in order to head in a better direction there must first be an acknowledgment that we are, indeed, heading in the *wrong* direction. Choosing to pretend that we are not part of the problem only cements our complicity in a culture that produces horrible acts of gun violence. Although the United States has 5% of the world's population, we are home to almost a third of all the world's mass shootings (31%).<sup>1</sup> We are part of the problem. Fortunately, as far as I can tell, New York is a state with guns laws that are stricter than most other states. However, there is much, much, much work to be done on the national level.

Our third response, as a Christian community, should be to do something, to speak truth to power and have our actions match our belief. Here I am humbly reminded that our motto here at Shelter Island Presbyterian Church is "as we believe, so we do." Well, that's not always an easy thing to do. Sometimes, speaking truth to power is a dangerous thing to do. Here we can learn some things from Elijah's narrative in today's passage from the book of First Kings. Elijah had spoken truth to power. He had called out King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and the entire nation of Israel, for that matter, on their idolatrous relationship with the pagan god, Baal. As many of you will remember from our worship service a few weeks ago, this prophetic encounter came to a boiling point when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel with what we lovingly referred to as the "Holy BBQ Throwdown." If you weren't able to attend that

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/13/health/mass-shootings-in-america-in-charts-and-graphs-trnd/>

service, allow me to catch you up by summarizing it. Elijah and the prophets of Baal had a contest of sorts at Mount Carmel. They built a pillar of wood and placed on it meat from a sacrificed cow. Simply put, each party was invited to call down the power of their god to bring flame upon the pillar. The prophets of Baal tried for many hours to convince their god to start the fire but to no avail. After mocking them, Elijah called on YHWH to bring down fire from heaven and remind the Israelites of who was *really* in charge. Well, God did not disappoint. As soon as the words of prayer escaped the lips of Elijah, God brought down the fire from heaven.

Needless to say, Jezebel was not pleased with this turn of events. Elijah had brought into question the idolatry of worshiping Baal and she was not going to let this prophetic act go unpunished. Therefore, she put a price on Elijah's head and Elijah made a run for it. He retreated into the wilderness, fleeing Jezebel's wrath. That is where we find him in today's passage. He has spoken truth to power and he is suffering the consequences of doing God's work and proclaiming God's word. He panics and runs away, depressed, and asks that God ends his life.

After being cared for by the angels of God, Elijah encounters God and God tells Elijah to go back out and continue his difficult but crucial work of speaking truth to power.

Friends, speaking truth to power is not easy. This is especially true when we are called to be Christians in a culture that has an idol of its own. I firmly believe that there is a case to be made that this country has come into an idolatrous relationship with guns. Frankly put, instead of placing our trust and devotion in peace and justice, we live in a nation that has prioritized the ownership of deadly weapons over the lives of people that often find themselves on the other end of the barrels of such deadly weapons - such as the 49 people slaughtered last week in Orlando.

Now, I must be careful here. I am a preacher of a congregation that has many opinions. That is ok. That is even healthy. Some of us are democrats and others are republicans and still others would consider themselves moderate independents. I would hope that we are a community in which a proper and healthy dialogue can be had.

However, I have another obligation as a preacher to preach the word of God. And I feel compelled to share with you that too long the church has remained silent on the topic of gun violence. We have passively stood by while the culture around us, of which we are a part, places priorities on individual rights over social justice.

For the record, I am not opposed to the 2nd Amendment. However, I believe that this nation's interpretation of this amendment has been abused and perverted. We have, before us, a narrative that says "since I *can* have something, means that I *should* have something." That is the logic that led to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel murdering Naboth in an attempt to steal his vineyard from him in last week's sermon passage.

You and I are called to speak up. You and I are called to do something. A quick look in this week's Shelter Island Reporter reveals the popular topics in Shelter Island this week. The Shelter Island 10K. The controversy surrounding AirBnB and other vehicles for short-term rental properties. The relocation of St. Gabe's Chapel. These are all important issues; I do not wish to belittle them. However, I couldn't help but notice that not one mention, that I can find, was made of the horrific events in Orlando.

There is a void here on this island. There is a conversation that isn't happening. We have a opportunity, perhaps even an obligation, as a congregation to speak up on behalf of that which the Gospel message convicts us.

Yes, we can choose to follow Elijah's lead and retreat to a cave to escape our duty. But the truth of today's passage reminds us that God will find us. God will convict us. God tells us to leave the cave and return to the world that needs to hear a message of love and peace.

How can we a public witness of love and peace here on Shelter Island in the wake of Orlando's shooting? Here are some responses that I hope will be considered here at Shelter Island Presbyterian Church.

- First of all, we can make a public acknowledgment that we stand in solidarity with the LGBT community. Our denomination has made incredible recent, if overdue, strides to declare its acceptance and blessing of LGBT persons. Are we ashamed of this or are we proud of this?
- Secondly, we can be aware of the sobering statistics that will, hopefully, compel this nation to finally address the systemic illness of gun violence. Did you know that it is usually far easier to purchase a military-style assault weapon than it is to access affordable mental healthcare in this country? Did you know that a grossly disproportionate amount of victims of gun violence are members of racial/ethnic minorities? Did you know that every time there is a mass shooting, every time the topic of gun control emerges in our political narrative, the purchase of such deadly weapons tends to skyrocket? Did you know that at the time the 2nd Amendment was written, a gun could, at most, be fired only 4 times a minute while pausing to reload each and every time? At the time the 2nd Amendment was written, there was no such thing as the Sig Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle such as the one that was used to kill the 49 people in Orlando.
- Thirdly, we, as a congregation, can choose to vote for politicians that advocate for stricter gun laws. We can publicly support a nation-wide ban on assault weapons like the one that was purchased legally to slaughter the people in the Pulse Nightclub.
- Fourthly, we can make it public knowledge that as of last year, Shelter Island Presbyterian Church is a "gun-free" zone. Yes, we are quite aware that labeling a place a "gun-free" zone does little, if anything, to dissuade someone from doing the unthinkable. However, what it *does* do is make a public affirmation that the church, of all places, should be a place where weapons of violence have no place. The only exception to this rule is law enforcement officers.
- Finally, at this upcoming Tuesday's Session meeting, I am making the recommendation that the Session approve the donation of all offerings at next week's Sunday worship service to the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Gun Violence Fund. This fund will help families with funeral expenses, support emotional and spiritual care for church leadership, and provide other resources to help communities recover from atrocities such as the one in Orlando. Furthermore, at this session meeting, I am going to encourage the session to endorse a letter highlighting our stance on gun violence to be sent and published in the Shelter Island Reporter to inform the Island that we are taking a stand. In this letter, I hope the session will invite the larger Shelter Island community to contribute to this gun violence fund. The members of the Shelter Island community have been very generous to contribute money to the saving of the St. Gabe's Chapel and the continuation of the Shelter Island Fireworks Show. It is my hope that this island will be equally generous when it comes to supporting the victims of gun violence.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we have an opportunity to stand up and do something. We have an opportunity to live into our motto of "as we believe, so we do." I hope you will join me in putting our belief into faithful actions.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.