

A Time for New Thinking and Faith

Mark 1.9-15

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I apologize to those of you who were expecting a different sermon this morning and for all of the notes at the bottom of your bulletin about Greek, Latin, and English word origins. Yesterday, in light of the school shooting in Florida, decided that I needed to use our time together to talk about that in light of our faith.

How long will Christians stand by — seemingly without power and influence — while kids are being slaughtered and while others go to school in fear to try and learn? How long, O Lord, how long?

Nineteen years ago, I was finishing up divinity school in Denver and I was back in Hartford, Connecticut, interviewing for a job as Associate Conference minister, and I remember sitting down to breakfast in the hotel, opening the newspaper and being shocked as I read about the shooting of twelve students and one teacher at Columbine High School. It was a pivotal moment in our nation, a moment when mass shootings became “normal.” How long, O Lord, how long?

And when I was serving in Hartford, I penned an Op-Ed piece for the Hartford *Courant*, entitled “Charlton Heston Is Not Moses,” (and for those who aren’t old enough to remember Charlton Heston, he was a movie star in the 1950s and 60s who played Moses in the Cecil B. DeMille blockbuster, *The Ten Commandments* and later president of the NRA).

As I read with sadness the story of yet another high school shooting, I was left thinking about the way many of us misperceive the Constitution as a sacred text that is both God-given and unchanging. The Constitution is not the Bible, and Charlton Heston is not Moses.

The men who drafted the Constitution were clear about the imperfection of their effort. Amendments address the document's imperfection. That mutability is part of the genius of the Constitution and explains why it has endured for more than 200 years.

We no longer count African Americans as three-fifths of a human being; we no longer deny the franchise to women and we no longer have a poll tax....

So, why do we lack the courage to change the Constitution, as gun violence claims the lives of young people in our city and in suburban high schools? ¹

¹ Hal Chorpenning, March 18, 2001, “Charlton Heston Isn’t Moses,” in the Hartford *Courant*.

I wrote those words seventeen years ago, and nothing significant has changed.
How Long, O Lord, how long?

Back in December 2012, a deranged young man with a cache of semiautomatic weapons shot and killed 28 people, many of them elementary school students and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut. We were outraged. President Obama went to Newtown and spoke passionately. Do you remember the faces of those twenty little children and their teachers? Even in the wake of their deaths, nothing happened to prevent further slaughter...no legislation to limit the kinds of firearms that are available...waiting periods, background checks, mental illness screening. Nothing has happened, and I think you and I both know why. How many more school kids have to die at the hands of gunmen before we do something? How long, O Lord, How long?

Why is killing innocent people seen in our country as morally acceptable? Why aren't all people of faith out on the streets demanding change. Our nation has become inured to this type of terrorism, and that must end.

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In today's text, Jesus gives two commands at the very end of that compact reading. The two commands are **repent** and **believe**. I want to talk about the verb, "to repent," because it's frankly a less-useful English translation than it should be of the New Testament's Greek word, *metanoia*, which literally means a shift in thinking. A more authentic and metaphoric translation may be a **change of heart**. And that is the first thing Jesus does in his public ministry: call for a change of heart in support of the kingdom of God, which stands over and against the empires of this world. He calls on us today to have a change of heart, to shift our thinking, to reassess our positions, to bring ourselves into alignment with God's liberating reign.

If we want to be part of the kingdom movement that Jesus calls us to, we need to do some serious, root-level self-examination about what causes us – especially men – to be violent, tightly wound, and desperate. (When was the last time you heard about a woman involved in a mass shooting?) Why do some American men who feel so hopeless, so aggrieved, so aggressive that we take weapons into hand and kill scores of people? We need to work on that, and in the meantime, how about if we start actively reducing the number of assault rifles, high-capacity-magazine pistols, and other semiautomatic weapons that are available to just about anyone?

The second command Jesus gives is **to believe**. Again, the 21st century meaning of the English word, believe, has precious little to do with what Jesus was talking about. He isn't saying that you need to grant intellectual assent to a proposition (like "Do you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour?") nor a laundry list of seemingly impossible things that most of us take as metaphor. The verb in New Testament Greek is *pisteuo*, which is the verbal form of the noun *pisis*, which means faith. Faith is more demanding; it's about trust and relationship, not about the kind of belief that means you think something is possible. The older sense of *believe* necessitates relationship, as when I look into your eyes and say, "I believe in you." And since we don't have an English word, "faithing," New Testament translators still fall back on the verb "believe." But that word for us is just not active enough or relational enough.

Friends, we need to have faith and trust in the way of Jesus, which is the way of nonviolence. We need to keep working to embrace the way of Jesus and kingdom of God he proclaimed. We need to trust God and not the powerbrokers in the gun lobby or those politicians who feed at their trough.

I made a futile search in our basement yesterday for some of the many medals and certificates I earned from the National Rifle Association when I was a boy. I loved riflery, and I have owned guns, though I don't currently. Way back in the 60s and 70s, the National Rifle Association's mission concerned with hunter safety and marksmanship. The mission and activity of the NRA changed dramatically back in the late 1970s² when a group within the organization wrested control and realigned their mission toward opposing any type of gun restrictions. I have no problem if someone wants to have an elk rifle or a shotgun at home, and though I'm not crazy about it, I'm okay if you want to have a pistol that you keep in a safe at home for self-defense. But nobody needs a AR-15 to shoot a deer. But hunter safety and marksmanship are not what the National Rifle Association is about anymore.

According to *Fortune* magazine,³ the top five U.S. senators receiving contributions from the NRA include our own Cory Gardner, who has received \$3.88 million from the NRA. And in the House of Representative, Congressman Ken Buck, whose district includes some of you in Windsor, comes in number two among 435 members of Congress with \$800,544 in the most recent election. But it's not just the legislative branch. The NRA spent \$11.4 million to support President Trump and \$19.7 to oppose Hilary Clinton in the most recent presidential election. That's over \$31 million.

We have a significant moral problem, my friends. Our words and our outrage are no longer enough. It is time for action. I've actually thought of an act of civil disobedience, like a line of clergy handcuffing ourselves to lampposts on either side of College Avenue and blocking traffic as a human chain. So, that probably won't happen, but if it does, I hope you'll help with bail. One thing that is happening and that was launched this week by the Women's March organization is a National School Walk-out by teachers and students on Wednesday, March 14. Of course, this falls during spring break for PSD and CSU.

So, if we want to do something, instead of just feeling outraged or aggrieved or traumatized, how about if we at Plymouth create a community-wide teach-in, maybe on March 14 since they won't be in school, and invite PSD, Front Range and CSU teachers, students, and other congregations and community members to come here are learn about reducing gun violence? What if we invited both of our U.S. Senators, our congressional and state representatives. Are you with me?

We know how to create programs at Plymouth...how about if we created one to affect big social change right in our community? I'm looking for people to help organize and lead, this, so if you are interested, put a note in the offering tray or on the red Friendship Pad and let me know!

² See Ron Elving, National Public Radio, Oct. 10, 2017, "The NRA wasn't always against gun restrictions." <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/10/556578593/the-nra-wasnt-always-against-gun-restrictions>

³ <http://fortune.com/2018/02/15/nra-contributions-politicians-senators/>

Repent and believe...Change your heart and trust in Christ. Work for the kingdom, God's liberating reign, for it is the hope of the world. I leave you this morning with a poem by William Stafford, called "The Way It Is," which is very similar to the children's book, *The Invisible String*. And as you hear this short poem, think about the thread as what weaves you and God and this community of faith to each other in relationship.

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.⁴

Amen.

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⁴ *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems by William Stafford*, ed. Kim Stafford. (Minneapolis: Lone Wolf Press, 2014).