

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford
The Right Reverend James E Curry
Proper 20B
September 23, 2018

My name is Jim Curry, I retired 4 years ago as Bishop Suffragan in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. At St. John's I'm better known as Kathleen McIntosh's husband, and Gretchen and Serena's father. All of them are well and send their love to you.

In my retirement I have focused much of my attention on community responses to the epidemic of gun violence which grips our country and our state—gun violence knows no limits of race, geography, socio-economic status, gender or age. Easy access to unlocked guns and ammunition continues to be a major factor in suicides by gun (2/3 of all gun deaths) and the accidental death of children. Guns in the hands of people who should not have guns are major factors in domestic violence and homicides.

At the offertory during today's service, the choir will sing a new adaptation of Psalm 23—the words are written by parishioner Mary Davies Cole and the music is composed by Scott Lamlein. These verses from the psalm are the text for this sermon:

“Even the dark of the blackest night
Cannot hide the path you have given me.
Death falls away at the sound of you voice,
Evil cannot hold, nor injustice thrive.”

Our God is a God of healing and hope who leads us through death and resurrection into new life. Our God seeks reconciliation and wholeness for all people.

That is the core of our faith and it is sealed by the life and death of Jesus.

We live lives that are full of choices. And the way of Jesus gives us a template for how to make our choices. “Evil cannot hold, nor injustice thrive” when we the people of faith reach out to one another in love and mutual concern. St. James is right: “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” And I would add “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

I want to give you just a little background about why I’m committed to this ministry to stop gun violence. It’s the story of 2 children. In March 1994, seven year old Marcelina Delgado was shot and killed as she slept in the back seat of her father’s car. Her family was on their way to visit her grandmother and were parked on the street next to a housing project in Hartford (under 3 miles from here). Gunmen in a car came abreast of her father’s car and opened fire. Marcelina died

from her injuries, her father was seriously wounded, but her other family members escaped physically unhurt but emotionally deeply wounded. The gunmen were caught and convicted of the crime. They thought the car belonged to a member of a rival gang—and they thought that was a sufficient excuse.

I didn't live in the Hartford area then—I was the priest of Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland, CT some twenty miles down-river. I can't tell you exactly why Marcelina's death, among so many other deaths, has had a lasting impact on me. But since I heard the news report on that day 24 years ago, her name and the image of her slain body has been etched into my memory and carved into my heart. Perhaps it is because there is no way to find meaning in this senseless murder. Perhaps it is because my own twin daughters, who were five then, often slept in the back seat of my car. Perhaps it was that Marcelina was a child of Hartford and a child of color—two identities we often choose to ignore. I do know that our little sister's blood cries out to us from the ground. And I believe we know the answer of Cain's question: Am I my brother's (or sister's) keeper? The answer is Yes! Yes, we are!

I remember thinking back then that we must do more to protect our children and recreate our neighborhoods. We have to rethink how we are community across the boundaries and divisions that separate us (boundaries of race, religion, class, and geographical location). I preached about it, got some people together and wrote some letters. And

then I moved on with my life. The Hartford Courant ran stories for a little while—and renewed them two years later during the trial of the shooters. But really, we all moved on. There were 58 homicides in Hartford that year—most were victims of shootings, most were people of color. We moved on. We lost an opportunity—all of us in greater Hartford (and all over CT)—to change who we are and how we relate to one another. We lost the opportunity to tip the scales against gun violence. We lost the opportunity to prepare our communities for a harvest of righteousness. I continue to carry guilt in my heart for our inaction.

On December 14, 2012, 28 people were killed by Adam Lanza in Sandy Hook, CT – 28 – 20 students, 6 teachers, his mother, and Adam himself. I remember driving out to Newtown from Hartford that day, being passed by police car after police car. I spent most of that day at Trinity Episcopal Church—waiting for word from the school and gathering in prayer as people came and went from the church. One of the children killed was 6 year old Ben Wheeler—a child of Trinity Church. Ben loved lighthouses, and he loved to play in the choir loft when his mother was at choir practice. Of course, parishioners and staff of the parish knew all the victims, students and teachers, and mother and son. I, never again, want to have to stand at the grave of a child killed in such a manner—to pray the prayers and silently hold grieving parents.

Three years ago, Ben's mother sent me a picture of a happier time. I keep it on my phone—a bunch of six year olds (Ben front and center) were mugging at the camera wearing little miters—little bishops' hats—in honor of my visit.



How can I (how can the churches united) not work to stop the senseless evil of gun violence? “Even the dark of the blackest night cannot hide the path that God has given us.”

Every year at the anniversary of the shootings in Sandy Hook, The Newtown Action Alliance holds a national vigil for the victims of Gun Violence at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. It is a time to gather to share stories (Oh, how important it is to keep raising up names and memories), to share grief, to sing and to pray and to act. For two days we take the families' stories of shootings to lawmakers—seeking legislative action and all too often being dismissed. One year

Francine and David Wheeler, Ben's parents, outspoken advocates for common sense gun laws, sang a love song for him and all who had died.

In 2016 we were joined by Jeremy Lucas, an Episcopal priest from a little town in Oregon. That summer he had heard that a local girls' softball team was having a raffle to raise \$3000 to send the team to a tournament in CA. The prize was an AR-15, a semi-automatic rifle. He was shocked and felt compelled to act. He tried to stop the raffle by offering to give the \$3000, but state law wouldn't allow that. So he bought tickets—lots of tickets—3000 tickets. When he won the raffle he was determined to destroy the gun he now owned. That was his choice. The gun lobby sent hate-filled letters to him and to the church. But Jeremy persisted. He discovered that there was a group in Colorado called RAW TOOLS that would take a weapon, destroy it so it could never be used to harm anyone again—and transform it into gardening tools.

During a vigil in Washington, Jeremy presented a trowel made from that gun to the leader of Newtown Action Alliance, in gratitude for its work to keep memories alive, change laws and save lives.

I had the chance to speak with Jeremy that night and to thank him for his imaginative and courageous actions. And as I shared my story of this cross—a cross made of destroyed weapons—I urged him to let part of that gun be made into a cross for him to wear. Trust me. even in a church like the Episcopal Church where bishops commonly wear crosses

around their necks—this cross, plain, raw metal, and heavy—very often calls forth comments and always lets me tell the story of the transforming power of God’s love for us. In the Cross, God takes the worst that we can do to one another—to kill one another—and transforms that evil through the power of love, to be God’s strongest sign of hope and new life.

In the summer of 2017, I began working with the Newtown Action Alliance and clergy in New Haven to build support for a project to turn all the guns that have been received in buyback programs sponsored by Yale New Haven Hospital and the New Haven Police Department into gardening tools. The police chief and his administration were thrilled with the idea. It gave a philosophic and theological umph to a buyback program that has been operating twice a year for over fifteen years. Under the title of Swords to Plowshares (that great prophecy of Isaiah) a record 141 guns were turned in last December. Each gun handed in was a voluntary choice by people who no longer wanted guns in their homes. The State police have vetted them to make sure that any that were tied to a crime would be set aside as evidence. Making sure every state law and local ordinance was followed, we have spent 10 months preparing to destroy weapons and begin the process of transforming them into gardening tools. Last Monday under the watchful eye of police, Bishop Douglas and I with a couple other volunteers became expert in grinding guns into pieces. This week leaders from Raw Tools have come to New

Haven to train inmates from the New Haven Correctional Center to become blacksmith artisans for creating hoes, cultivators and shovels. They will continue this work in the next weeks and months. We hope to have the first set of tools—instruments of life made from instruments of death—ready to be presented to community gardens and schools for next spring's planting season. A symbolic step—and a real step—toward realigning community values.

I'm tempted often to cry out to God—you promised that evil would not prosper and peace will flourish. But when will it happen? You have promised that death will fall away at the sound of your voice. As I see the deaths mount up and the rationalizing of politicians, I sometimes despair that this vision is just a pipe dream.

But then I remember Jeremy Lucas, and the leaders of Newtown Action Alliance. I remember Ben Wheeler and Marcelina Delgado, our children who died as victims of gun violence. I remember David and Francine Wheeler, grieving parents and persistent singers of hope. I remember the members of Raw Tools who will go anywhere in our country to teach the skills of transformation. And I remember 4 inmates from our local jail who are turning their lives around and creating symbols of hope. And I remember the words of the psalm: even the dark of the blackest night cannot hide the path God have given us.

God's promises to Israel were made in a time of political upheaval and violence centuries ago, and they still hold true for those willing to

look for them and act on them. We, each of us and all of us, can choose to work to end the violence. We have the choice to turn away from weapons of death. We have the choice to stand with victims of violence. We have the choice to claim Isaiah's vision of Swords to Plowshares and Guns to Gardening Tools—for our own. We have the choice to honor those who have died by gun violence with our actions and our commitment never to stop until there is true peace in all of our communities.

We have the choice.

Amen