

(7th Sunday of Easter)

Deuteronomy 30:15-19

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live...I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Matthew 26:47-52

"While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs...then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.'"

This Memorial Day weekend many Americans will participate in events honoring those killed in war. One way we "honor" the dead and remember them, is by decorating their graves, which is how this holiday, formerly known as Decoration Day, began.

In Indianapolis, in Crown Hill Cemetery, there is a grave of a Civil War veteran. He was my great-great-grandfather on my mother's side.

His grave) is among the many Civil War veterans. Just down from his grave is another grave of a person who was a "veteran of sorts" of the Civil War. This one, which is more of a monument, is for Dr. Richard J. Gatling, inventor of the first rapid fire machine gun that bears his name - **The Gatling Gun**. According to one source, he invented it to **"reduce the size of armies, and thus cut down on the number of men killed or wounded in battle, and to show how futile war is"**. (<http://www.history.com/topics/gatling-gun>)

The Civil War gave rise to many advancements in firearm technology that made for a better, more accurate rifle for use in battle. Men, marching in close ranks, shoulder to shoulder, could now fire with deadly accuracy at 100 yards versus 400 yards.

With better guns in their ranks, Americans marched into battle on September 17, 1862 at Antietam. By the day's end, over "23,000 men killed, wounded or went missing." During the three day battle in Gettysburg, over 7,000 men were killed. By the time we stopped killing each other during the Civil War, over 620,000 men had died. Following the war, and with so many fresh graves of young men killed, people started showing up to decorate their graves. Thus Decoration Day (now Memorial Day) was founded.

The practice of decorating the graves and honoring those killed in wars continues today. By one count, the number of those killed in all our wars from

the Revolution to today is more than 1.1 million.

(<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/many-americans-died-u-s-wars/>)

That is a lot of graves to decorate. Way too many, if you ask me.

While we are honoring those killed in battle, we might want to also pause to remember and honor the 30,000 Americans who are killed each year in another type of war we are fighting.

Since President John F. Kennedy's assassination, over one million Americans have been killed by guns on our own soil. One million dead! That is as many as our total number of soldiers killed in all our combined wars!
(*Gun Sabbath Resources*)

These deaths have occurred as murders, accidental shootings, domestic disputes, law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty, and law enforcement officers killing others, sometimes unjustifiably, and of course, suicide.

Suicide accounts for half of these deaths every year. On average, 22 veterans kill themselves by suicide each day! And just this week in McFarland at the middle school, in two separate incidents, a teacher and a student had their worlds turned upside down, when first a brother and then a father, each killed themselves.

Every day, on average, 93 Americans are killed by guns. The statistics show that after traffic accidents, firearms are the second leading cause of death for our children under the age of 19. Each day, 8 American children or teenagers are killed by a gun. (<https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>)

The Rev. Fred Davie, speaking on gun violence in our society, says: **"In tragedy after tragedy this year, we've seen that the epidemic of gun violence is not contained to one community or group, but that it touches us all regardless of geography or race, age or occupation, religion or political party. And when it does, the grief that tears at the heart of a mother in the inner city of New York is the same as that of a brother in rural Wisconsin (Iowa) and a daughter in the suburbs of Ohio."** (*God and Guns: Faith Leaders on Gun Violence*)

I wonder how many of you know of someone who has killed or wounded by a gun?

So why does the issue of guns and gun violence matter to us as a people of faith, especially since neither the Bible nor Jesus had anything to say about guns? That is true. But while guns and gun violence may not be addressed directly in the Scriptures, "human dignity, the sanctity of all life, the *imago Dei* (sacred image of God) in each individual is." (*Lisa L. Thompson - God Not Guns Conference*)

As followers of Jesus, the sanctity of all human life is one of our core beliefs. This is what we profess each Sunday, when we say to our children,

and to ourselves in that way, **"You are God's Beloved Child. With you, God is well pleased."**

In her theological, keynote address at the ***God Not Guns: Faith Leaders Address Gun Violence*** conference held at Riverside Church in New York City, Lisa L. Thompson, assistant Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary said: **"...we say that gun violence leads to disregard for human life and dignity... (Gun Violence) does not recognize the image of God in every person because it takes life away so carelessly."**

When we acknowledge this, she says, we can begin to have theological and Biblical discussion about gun violence in our country.

As people who profess to follow Jesus Christ and seek to faithfully live our lives based on his own life, then we must take a serious look at our response and responsibility towards guns and gun violence.

As I said, there is no mention of guns in the Scriptures, but there are texts that deal with violence and as well as God's response to it.

In Genesis 1, God creates all human life, male and female, in God's own image. But from that point on, beginning with Cain killing his brother, Abel, humans have struggled to honor the sacred image of God in one another.

And so it is throughout the Scriptures, when we commit violent acts, killing one another, sometimes in God's own name, we also kill the sacred image of God in us.

God, pained by our violent abuses of another human's life, always responds, with words of forgiveness and healing. In doing so, God reminds us of our call to honor the Divine Image in each person, and the sacredness of all human life.

That is why, in the 10 Commandments, God says: **"Thou Shall Not Kill!"**

But sadly, we violate the Commandments, by continuing to kill one another, and in doing so each and every time, we continue to kill the sacred image of God that dwells in us.

With the Commandments in the Ark of the Covenant, and the people finally on the verge of the Jordan, about to begin a new life in a new land, Moses says to them: **"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live."**

But they don't, do they? No. Violence and Death, hatred and killing continue to follow the people even as they begin life anew. Still, God will not give up on them. Again, God reminds the people, this time through the voice

of the prophet Isaiah and Micah, who implore the people to **“beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks,”** and study war no more so they may live in peace with one another. Heavy sigh here, because the people continue to do violence to one another.

Which brings us to Jesus. In his own life and teachings, Jesus calls us to honor the sacredness of all life, loving one another as he demonstrated in his own life, even those we would name as our enemies.

And again, while there is no mention of guns, Jesus, who is about to be arrested by armed soldiers, is defended by one of his disciples. The disciple draws his sword, and in what some might argue is a justifiable, “stand your ground”, act of self-defense, violently strikes a law enforcement officer, wounding him, by cutting off his ear.

But Jesus never sees violence, even violence we might believe is justifiable in defense of another human life, as acceptable.

Jesus says to the disciple and to us: **“Put away your sword. For those who live by the sword will perish by it.”**

In Luke’s account of this incident, after the violent physical reaction of his disciple towards the other armed person, Jesus says: **“No more of this!”** He then touches the guard’s wound and heals him.

“Put away your sword.” “No more of this!” “Thou shall not kill”. “Beat your swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks, and study war no more.” “Choose life and not death, that you may live.”

So here we are today, Memorial Day Weekend, honoring those who have been killed in battle, and who, if we are honest, and the dead need no reminder of this, had probably killed too.

My guess is, any victim of violence be it a war, a bombing or a person who was shot by a gun, would echo Jesus’ words - **“No more of this!”**

And yet, even as we sit here worshipping God, seeking to honor the sacredness of all human life, wanting to faithfully follow Jesus, professing to love one another as Christ loved us, another gun is fired, another life of child, a woman or a man is taken, and the killing continues.

What does our nation’s obsession with guns, the worship of the Second Amendment, and the growing epidemic of gun violence and killings that leads to 30,000 deaths each year, have to do with us as followers of Jesus Christ?

You are followers of Jesus, what do you believe?