

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 32:1-10

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’”

Perhaps you have noticed my new orange stole? Orange is not one of our traditional liturgical colors. Orange is the symbolic color of Gun Violence Prevention. My stole was made by Colleen Hintz of Fruit of the Vine Vestments. She made several hundred of these stoles for the Episcopal Bishops and Priests to wear on the steps of the US Capital when they gathered to speak out on the epidemic of gun violence infecting our nation.

The faces are illustrated by Eric Carle from the children’s book, “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?” Maybe you read that book to your children or grandchildren? *“Children, children what do you see? We see...”*

As we have talked about before, gun violence prevention is a faith issue for us as Presbyterians. It should be for all of whom profess to be followers of the Prince of Peace.

Because we are the Beloved children of God, we seek to live out the two greatest Commandments, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and love your neighbors as you love yourselves”. One way we are doing this is by wearing our masks and physically distancing. In doing so, we acknowledge and honor the Sacred Presence in each human being.

Because of God's love for us, the health, safety and wellbeing of our neighbors is important to us. And not just those who attend church with us, or live in our community, but around the state, across our nation and all around the world. Because we believe that everyone, collectively, reflects the sacred image of our Creator.

Why am I mentioning my new orange Gun Violence Prevention stole and our wearing masks for the health and safety of others this morning? Because they are both related to our faith in Christ.

We know the reason we are worshipping outside, masked up and physically distance is due to the COVID-19 virus. What you may or may not be aware of is that since the lockdown in March, the United States has seen record number of gun sales, topping over 3 million. And then there are the "ghost guns" that people are also purchasing, piece by piece through the mail, which are untraceable.

With the spike in gun purchases, America has also seen an increase in gun violence from suicide to homicides to shootings at gatherings to police shootings.

Gun violence in Madison is escalating. As we are aware, 11-year-old, Anisa Scott, was shot and killed while a passenger. And now, in Kenosha, Jacob Blake, a father of 3, shot 7 times in the back in front of his three children.

Following Jacob Blake's shooting, a 17 year-old white male armed with military grade rifle, having been driven to Kenosha by his mother, so he could be a part of armed vigilante militia, shoots two people, killing them, wounding another.

What does that have to do with us here in Cambridge? After all, it is happening somewhere else, to other people, and not here to us and our neighbors.

Some of you may know, Carol Swain Gunnelson. Carol teaches elementary school here in Cambridge. In a recent comment to me, Carol said: **"If you choose not to see a problem, just because it doesn't affect you, then it continues to be a problem. And someday it may be your problem."**

Pastor Charlie Berthoud and the people of Covenant Presbyterian Church found this out recently. At a recent Celebration of Life gathering at a park very near Covenant, shots rang out, scattering the crowd of 300 men, women and children. The next morning, Charlie was at the park, live-streaming a prayer for the victims of gun violence. Gun Violence Prevention is a faith issue to us and we are all called to address it!

Then again, maybe you are aware that gun violence has impacted our own community, not yet like it has in Madison, Milwaukee or Kenosha, but it has taken the lives of people we have known and loved, like the person who shot and killed himself recently at the Cam-Rock Park Shelter. Or, as some of us remember all too well, Clyde.

Gun Violence impacts us all. Gun Violence Prevention is a faith issue and one we are called to address as followers of Jesus.

Did you know the Presbyterian Church (USA) ordained the Rev. Deanna Hollas as minister of Gun Violence Prevention?

In a recent conversation with the Rev. Sharon Risher, whose mother, two cousins, and a childhood friend were victims of gun violence, all being shot and killed by 19 year-old Dylan Roof, while attending a bible study at Emmanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Rev. Hollas, said: **“Following a tragedy, people can respond one of two ways. They can decide to take arms to protect themselves or they can choose to speak out to end gun violence.”**

Rev. Sharon Risher is a survivor of gun violence. The Rev. Deanna Hollas is not. What they both are is followers of Jesus Christ, mothers who are scared for the health and safety of our children, and global neighbors. Gun Violence Prevention is a racial justice issue, and an issue of faith!

Friends, we cannot talk about gun violence without talking about racism in America and the difference in what happened in Kenosha to Jacob Blake, a black man and Kyle Rittenhouse, a white teenager. We cannot end racial discrimination without addressing gun violence. We cannot be faithful to God’s commandments to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves without our working to end gun violence in our nation.

Yes, I know, some of you are saying, but the Second Amendment protects our right to own guns. Yes, sort of, though that is for a discussion in political science class where you would learn that the late Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia famously said in the 2007 case of the “District of Columbia vs. Heller” - **“Like most rights, the Second Amendment right is not unlimited. It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose...”**

But we are not here as Americans to debate . We are here, first and foremost, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, followers of Jesus Christ, the beloved children of our Creator. Our loyalty above any flag, party or constitution is to God our Creator and Redeemer, who again, commands us to love one another. Which brings us to our Scripture lesson this morning.

While Moses was up Mt. Sinai receiving those Commandments, you know the one that begins with **“I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other**

gods before me..." the people were busy making a Golden Calf to worship and celebrate.

While this bible story happened a long time ago, the Golden Calf still exists today. It is called the Second Amendment, and guns of all types, have become the "other gods and idols" people have chosen to worship and serve above the Lord our God.

The Rev. Keri Parker, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches offers this thought: "Jacob Blake was shot by police officers multiple times, in front of his children, in front of witnesses, on camera. (17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse responded to vigilantes' call for followers to bring their guns to Kenosha. His mother drove him. He was greeted and thanked by some of the Kenosha police, and then shot and killed 2 people, walking past the police afterwards with the military rifle he used to fire 9 rounds.)

"The system," Keri says, "is doing what it was intended to do: training people to be fearful, to dehumanize, destroying relationships, escalating to the point of causing humans to trap and kill other humans. This is brokenness and this is evil. (This is not of God.)

"We have chosen this way, because we have refused to imagine and enact another way. We have chosen this way because we have consistently refused to root out evil and say there is no room for this among us." (Because we continue to worship the god of the gun and not the God of Life).

"Will we choose another way?" Keri asks? Or "Will we choose God's way?"

I hope someday, I do not have to wear this Gun Violence Prevention stole, not because I am retired and no longer serving a church. No, because we will have finally beat our guns into instruments of hope and healing and turned from our violent ways to walk in the Love and Light of God, faithful at last to the greatest commandments.

Children, children of God, what do you see? We see...God's sacred image in all people and in you and in me. Amen.