

## (Memorial Day Weekend)

Romans 8:31-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword or guns? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 5:4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

This past March, Sam and I took a trip to Springfield, Illinois to visit the Lincoln Historic sites, including President Lincoln’s tomb.

While Sam and I stood before his tomb, it occurred to me, President Lincoln, as the Commander-in-Chief, was “killed in action” serving his nation during a time of war, a victim of gun violence, when he was shot and killed while attending a play at Ford’s Theatre.

During the Civil War, it is estimated that 620,000 soldiers were killed in a war we fought against each other.

620,000 dead soldiers that needed to be buried. People living near those killing fields, especially slaves or other blacks, were often left with the responsibilities to bury the dead on both sides of the Civil War.

Memorial Day, as you may know, was originally referred to as Decoration Day. Decoration Day started post-Civil War, when former slaves in Charleston, South Carolina took time to remember the dead soldiers on both sides, some who had fought to free them from the bondage of slavery and others who fought to keep them enslaved as property, processed to a cemetery and decorated their graves.

The poet Thomas Lynch says: **“A graveyard is an old agreement made between the living and the living who have died that says we keep their names and dates alive.”**

I think President Lincoln would have appreciated Thomas Lynch’s words, when he stood with fresh graves all around him, to dedicate that hallowed land in Gettysburg as a national cemetery, famously saying:

“We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

620,000 soldiers were killed in the Civil War alone.

The total number of US soldiers killed in all wars beginning with the Revolutionary War, is estimated to be around 1.4 million.

Think of that number, 1.4 million graves to decorate of young men and women, many of them barely out of their teen years who were killed in all our wars and conflicts.

1.4 million soldiers who gave, as President Lincoln said, **“Their last full measure of devotion”** defending our freedom as Americans.

We are aware of those freedoms they died defending, like the freedom to worship. One of the other freedoms they died defending is the freedom to bear arms or guns.

So on this Memorial Day, we pause to remember those who died in wars, defending that right for Americans, to buy guns, military grade assault rifles like AR-15, machine guns, ghost guns, and to do so without needing in many states like Texas, a background check, a mental health screening, or a waiting period or any form of gun safety course, and then being free to openly carry these weapons in schools, churches, grocery stores, movie theaters, at children’s sporting events or in bars.

*In Wisconsin, while you are supposed to have a concealed carry permit for handguns, you do not need such a permit to openly carry an AR-15 assault rifle, like the ones used in most mass shootings, down Main Street here in Cambridge or anywhere in Wisconsin.*

Those 1.4 million soldiers died defending the freedom of 1.6 million Americans who have been shot and killed by other Americans with guns

because of the sacrifice of our soldiers made so they would be free to buy, carry and use those guns to kill.

Do you know Ruth Whitfield? She lived in Buffalo until recently. At 86 years-old, she would daily visit her husband in a nursing home, sometimes stopping to buy food to eat on her way home.

She never got to eat her meal nor will she ever be able to visit her husband again, because a 19 year-old white male had the freedom to legally purchase an AR-15 military assault weapon which he used to kill Ruth Whitfield and 9 others.

The 1.4 million soldiers died defending the freedom of school children at places like Sandy Hook Elementary School, Columbine High School, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, and the elementary school children at Robb Elementary school in Texas to attend school, safely. And they died defending the freedom of a high school student, who upon turning 18, was able to legally purchase two AR-15 military style weapons and over 300 rounds of ammunition.

1.4 million American soldiers died for the freedom for so other Americans could legally own and carry guns that were used in 250 school shootings since 1997.

We will decorate the graves of soldiers killed in all the wars we have fought, but shouldn't we also decorate the graves, some still fresh, killed in the ongoing gun violence wars we are engaged in our own country?

The number of Americans who have been killed by other Americans in the ongoing gun war against ourselves is far greater. Since 1963, 1.6 million Americans have died in this ongoing battle, like the Civil War, we are fighting against ourselves.

Of course, those numbers of our US soldiers who died in all our wars, does not include the 17 soldiers who die each day by suicide, 3 out of four, who use a gun to complete their suicide.

If we are decorating the graves of these brave men and women, shouldn't we also acknowledge the toll such violence takes on soldiers who return from war only to carry its trauma with them?

Scott Gennrich is a neighbor to our church. He lives down around the corner from the Lake Ripley Lanes. He is one of my colleagues in McFarland, serving as our building maintenance person at the middle school. He is also a veteran, and has two sons in the military, one who graduated from Cambridge a few years ago.

Scott is very involved with the helping veterans heal from the trauma of war. This weekend he is in Chicago participating in the Ruck March to bring

awareness to Soldier/Veteran Suicide. The other day we talked about the fact that the number of completed suicides by soldiers traumatized by war has dropped from 22 a day to only 17, as if that was good news.

If as Americans, if as followers of Christ, who sit here in worship this morning, grateful for those who died for our freedom to worship as we so choose, that what I am saying makes us uncomfortable, even angry, then we need to ask ourselves why?

Through the Prophet Isaiah, God calls us to “beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks.”

We profess to follow the non-violent Jesus, who taught us to love one another, saying, “You have heard it said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you.’”

We follow are here to worship the non-violent Jesus who said to his armed disciple in the garden who attacked another armed soldier who was there to arrest Jesus, cutting of his ear, “Put away your sword for those who live by the sword will die by the sword.”

The late Peter Gnomes, chaplain at Harvard, said: **“The question should not be ‘What would Jesus do?’ but rather, more dangerously, ‘What would Jesus have me do?’ The onus is not on Jesus but on us....”**

During the Vietnam War, my parents took in a young man, Raymond Holeman who had a troubled home life. He lived with us his senior year, graduating in 1965. After school, he joined the Marines, and was sent to fight in Vietnam. PFC Raymond W. Holeman USMC was killed by an explosive device.

There are times I want to go to the Vietnam Memorial Wall and touch his name and ask him questions about his short life.

I thought about him more recently when I was teaching Freshman US History and the unit on Vietnam. I am one of the only people in the high school who was alive during that war.

I grieve for him, a young man, who was the age of our two high school graduates, Trevor and Jacob. I grieve for a life that could have been, save for yet another war.

I grieve for the lives of 19 nine- and 10-year-old elementary students, and their two teachers, who two days before the end of their school year, were killed in their classroom, casualties in a war we continue to wage against one another over the right to bear arms, earned by those who died in wars so we Americans can have the “freedom” to use guns to fight this ongoing war against ourselves.

I grieve for Ruth Whitfield who was shot and killed along with 9 others at the Tops Grocery Store in Buffalo by a 19-year-old teenager who was legally able to purchase the AR-15 assault rifle.

I tired of lighting candles. I am frustrated with our elected officials who offer excuses as to why they will not do anything to end this senseless war we are fighting in our nation.

Last year, I watched Al Bettenhausen and other veterans, place flags on the graves of those who served in the military, some who were killed in war. It was pretty moving.

It made me think of the scene in "Saving Private Ryan" when the mother collapses upon receiving the news that her sons had been killed in the D-Day invasion.

It also made me also think of many parents and their family who received the horrific news that their child, a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a parent or finance, had been killed in battle in a war or in a school or a grocery store or a church.

As I was finishing this, I saw a news break that the husband of one of the teachers killed in the shooting at Robb Elementary School, upon returning from dropping off flowers at the memorial set up for his wife, her colleague and their students, died of a heart attack. The trauma of this gun violence war does that to us.

As followers of Christ, as Americans, let me ask you, haven't you had enough with people being killed in wars and in our streets, in grocery stores, in movie theaters, in nightclubs, in our places of worship and in our schools?

Isn't it time we, do what God commands of us, begs of us, and beat our weapons of war and our guns into instruments of God's healing and hope?

How many more wars will we fight? How many more soldiers will die? How many more people including children will be killed before we have had enough?

I am guessing God has enough, I am just not sure we have?

Jesus wept, and still seems to be.

What can we do?

1. Write, email, call and visit your elected officials and ask them to #BanAssaultWeapons now!

2. Ask your elected official to pass mandatory background checks and mental health screenings and at least a 72-hour waiting period for everyone who wants to own a gun. HR-8
3. Ask your elected officials to ban ghost guns.
4. Ask them to stop guns from being sold at gun shows or in private sales out of homes.
5. Join me in wearing "Orange to End Gun Violence" June 1-5
6. Donate a gun you wish to get rid of for our "Guns to Gardens" event here at OCPC on July 24.
7. Join me in participating in the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Gun Violence Prevention Ministry.
8. Get involved with Moms Demand Action or the Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort.
9. Turn your prayers into action, advocacy and community education.
10. Love one another as Jesus loved, so we can end the violence and hatred in our nation.

<https://www.everytown.org/what-is-hr-8/?fbclid=IwAR083YaaZ8ClpZ5gFYzfSf4RIEsxkBr04cDOuhXYOo1P0VYGxEtpvVZPfYQ>