

“Where is God Now?”

Sermon for the Service in Remembrance of Victims of the Recent Mass Murders in Las Vegas, NV  
Given by the Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland  
At the Cathedral of the Incarnation, Baltimore, MD  
October 3, 2017 – Noon

Columbine High School Massacre  
Amish School Massacre  
Virginia Tech  
Binghamton, NY  
Fort Hood, Texas  
Aurora, CO Movie Theater Massacre  
Sikh Temple Shootings in Oak Creek, WI  
Sandy Hook School Massacre, Newtown, CT  
Washington Navy Yard, DC  
Umpqua Community College, Oregon  
San Bernardino,  
Orlando  
Dallas  
Baton Rouge  
Cascade Mall, Burlington, WA  
Fort Lauderdale  
Kirkersville Nursing Home, OH  
Tunkhannock Supermarket Massacre, PA

And in the last eight days alone: shootings at Burnette Church of Christ in Antioch, TN, Lawrence, KS, and now, Las Vegas, NV. These are only *some* of the mass shootings in America since 1999. There have been at least 91 mass shootings in the last three-plus decades – and most of the killers got their guns legally. ([www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map/](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map/))

We are now used to this as a nation. In the United States of America, still the world’s preeminent superpower and self-proclaimed moral force for good in the world, over 30,000 of our citizens are killed every year by firearms. Another 80,000+ are shot every year, most of whom will carry permanent injuries, & all of whom will carry emotional scars for the rest of their lives. Just think about these figures...what it means is that every 8-10 years, one million people are shot in this country.

33,169 deaths by firearms  
84,258 nonfatal firearms injuries

Of the deaths:

11,208 were homicides; 21,175 were suicides; 10,000 children killed or injured by firearms (Medical Journal *Pediatrics*)

(Data on gun violence in the U.S. from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for 2013)

Breaking that down, here’s what those numbers mean: (all stats reported in January 2016 on the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence website from numerous cited sources.)

- One in three people in the U.S. knows someone who has been shot.

- On average, 31 American are murdered with guns every day, and 151 are treated for a gun assault in an emergency room.
- Every day on average, 55 people kill themselves with a firearm, and 46 people are shot or killed in an accident with a gun.
- A gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in a domestic homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting than to be used in self-defense.
- More than one in five U.S. teenagers (ages 14-17) report having witnessed a shooting.
- An average of seven children & teens are killed by guns every day.
- American children die by guns 11 times as often as children in other high-income countries.
- Youth (ages 0-19) in the most rural counties are as likely to die from a gunshot as those living in the most urban counties. Rural children die of more gun suicides and accidental shooting deaths. Urban children die more often of gun homicides.
- Firearm homicide is the second-leading cause of death (after motor vehicle crashes) for young people ages 1-19 in the U.S.
- More pre-school-aged children were killed by guns in 2007 than police officers were killed in the line of duty.

This comes at a tremendous cost to our society: one million emergency room scenes, one million families grieving, one million victims and survivors trying to put broken bodies and wounded souls back together again. The financial costs to our health system (estimated at \$2.5 billion, with almost half the costs borne by taxpayers), the long term costs of physical rehabilitation, and the emotional costs to the victims and their families lasts for decades.

We are here to mourn, yes. We are here in solidarity with the victims, yes. We pray for the repose of those who died, give care to the bereaved, and stand with those who grieve, yes. Our thoughts and prayers are with them in their sorrow, and we wait with them for the comfort and peace of the Holy Spirit. But how many prayer services, prayer watches and funerals of victims of gun violence do we continue to call for before we begin to think that this is normal, and that we can't do anything about it?

I took snapped a photo yesterday of a sidewalk chalk board sign outside of my local coffee shop. The only thing printed on it was this: "GOD HELP US!"

God help us, yes. But is that a prayer of hope, or is it a lament of despair? Because after tragedies of mass suffering the question in many peoples' minds is "Where is God in all this? How could God have allowed this to happen? Where is God now?"

I'm here to tell you today that God is where he has always been, and that is everywhere where love, compassion and justice resides. God is in your heart moving you with compassion, and God is there with all these victims of senseless violence in a special way.

But God is also the one who is moving you to act! God does not merely comfort you; He also challenges you to do more and accomplish more for peace and justice than you think is possible. But who wants to be challenged if it makes you uncomfortable, or causes you to change your mind about some things, or if you are a public servant, that challenge by God is not the politically safe thing to do?

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy 30:11-20) God says this:

*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it*

*and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*

***Behold, 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 and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 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, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live.***

God is telling us that we have a choice to make: life or death. To choose life means that you have to STOP CHOOSING DEATH – and all the instruments of mass death that we have come to love so dearly.

In the New Testament, Matthew 26:47-52 records this episode near the end of Jesus' earthly life: *While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting 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.*

Jesus told a disciple to put his sword away when the authorities came to arrest Jesus. "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

What would Jesus say about AK-47s, Uzi machine guns or any other automatic assault weapons? He would say, "Put them away! They have no place in a society committed to a common good; committed to shared values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Nor do they have any place in God's desire for how we should live!"

If the command of Jesus to put away our modern lethal "swords" sounds unrealistic to you, it is because we have done a poor job in this country of teaching any of the principles of nonviolence. Many fear that our culture will never do this, because we have become intoxicated with violence as the only effective means to achieve our personal and national aspirations. We have worshiped for too long at the altar of the gun to solve our problems. This has led to what can be called The Mythology of Violence; namely, the widely held myth that violence works, and that nonviolence is a pipe dream for idealists who do not know how the world really operates.

One need not be a pacifist like Jesus, Gandhi or King in order to learn any of the almost 200 methods of nonviolent action that have been proven to be effective in removing unjust institutions and governments, and in restoring peace and freedom in a society. As Christians, as followers of Christ, we are called upon to teach peace as well as to practice peace, which means we have to continually re-learn the ways of peace in a culture that's awash in violence. We must repent, both individually and collectively, for our idolatrous attachment to guns and other weapons that kill masses of people in only seconds.

Where is God in all this? God is the one who is pushing your conscience right now to act. God is not to blame for our violent culture; *we* are! And we need to take personal and social responsibility for fixing the problem of gun violence that we have created.

Just as God moved religious leaders in this country to put pressure on the political system to end to slavery, segregation and injustice, so he's moving us today to demand action from our politicians to reduce gun violence.

As it turns out, this week in Congress the elected representatives of the people will vote on a bill to deregulate silencers. The bill's proponents say it will be gentler on hunters' ears. Seriously? That's their reasoning. Silencers will make it harder to identify the location of guns in active shooter situations.

The House of Representatives is also voting on a bill making it easier for people to carry concealed weapons in any state in the nation without any sort of background check. Do we really believe that giving everyone easier access to lethal weapons is going to make us safer? Are we going to say death in our streets—whether Las Vegas or Baltimore, Orlando or Newtown—is collateral damage or the price we pay for the right to bear arms?

Changing laws is not going to end every act of gun violence. We know there are many causes for this epidemic. But we also know that arming everyone with more and more deadly weapons will not reduce mass shootings. That's not good policy; that's insanity! Arming everyone to the teeth will only increase our death spiral into lethal madness.

What can we do? Let's start by calling our members of Congress today and tell them as a person of faith, as a person who believes in the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, our representatives must vote no on H.R. 3668, the SHARE Act that would gut long-standing regulations on silencers and loosen restrictions on armor piercing bullets.

They must vote no on H.R. 38, the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act that would force states to honor the concealed carry weapons permits of every other state, regardless of how lax the other state's law.

And they must ban all military style firearms: assault weapons and large capacity magazines, which have no place in the hands of private citizens.

Politicians who are beholden to the gun lobby will try to dissuade you from advocating for common sense legal remedies. They will criticize you for "doing politics in the name of the religion," just as those opposed to God's values have criticized the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Christian abolitionists, leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, and those who continually push for the rights of every human being. Don't fall for tactics that try to prevent you from acting on your religious beliefs.

They will try to make you afraid to speak out. Fear is ruling our country. More than 300 times in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures we hear God or Jesus tell us to not be afraid. We have a God who tells us, and lived with us to show us, that love is stronger than death.

God is love, the scriptures tell us. God is life. Let's stop choosing death. Choose life!