

## **“Christianity and Gun Violence”**

September 25, 2016

*Can We Talk? Where Faith and Politics Meet* series

Oscar Bergland was born in the Upper Peninsula. He grew up hunting and fishing. He became a Michigan State Policeman. He was a firearms instructor for the State Police and coached the Pistol Team. He was a Post Commander and Police Liaison Director in his later years. After he retired, he was a gunsmith. He died in 1973.

I tell you all of this because Oscar Bergland was my grandfather – my mom’s dad. He died before I was born. I can’t think about this issue - guns and gun violence - without thinking about him. I think about other law enforcement. I think about victims of gun violence.

As I thought about gun violence and all that’s associated with it, I know it’s personal for each of us. I asked my mom if she knew much about my grandpa’s view on guns and gun violence. One thing she said to me was that he had a healthy respect for guns. I’d assume that considering his work to train other officers.

So that’s where I start today along with my own very limited experience of firearms. Some of you know I grew up on a dairy farm. My dad had a couple of shotguns, and I’m sure he had to use them in those moments when an animal had to be put down, but we never talked about it very much.

Even so, this is not a new discussion. Questions about faith and the issue of guns and gun violence have been present in every congregation I’ve served, and I know that all of us here don’t have the same opinion when it comes to guns. And I know our experience differs. Some are concerned about personal protection. Some are hunters. Some may have a gun that was passed down to you.

I do believe, though, that none of us wants to see gun violence increase. After the report of another shooting in Muskegon on Wednesday afternoon, I don’t say that flippantly and sarcastically, but I know we have different opinions about how we respond to gun violence and prevent it. My primary concern is gun violence. How do we do everything we can to prevent it?

When we talk about gun control and gun rights, I don’t think we have to be on opposite sides, though that’s how we sometimes separate ourselves. I hope that proper training and gun safety is something we’re all concerned about no matter how we feel about guns. Programs like Scouting and Sportsmen for Youth place that vital emphasis on training, safety, and responsibility, and many of our young people are involved in them.

I appreciated the reflection of Bill and Jean Basore who own store that sells firearms and offers comprehensive training in Kansas. Their emphasis on responsibility and training in using a firearm and knowing the law is critical in the discussion.

I also appreciated the challenge I heard from Pastor Adam Hamilton. He lifted up the need for a more serious view of firearms. Just as we require someone to have training, on-the-road experiences, and testing before getting a driver's license, how do our laws and views of guns stack up? In doing some research, it's clear that regulation isn't consistent from state to state. I need to be more informed about Michigan laws regarding firearms.

At the beginning of this year, BBC News reported that more than 13,200 people were killed by firearms in 2015 and more than 26,800 injured. These numbers don't include suicide.

For the over 300 million firearms held by the general population in the U.S. alone, the questions really center on how we keep people from harming themselves or others. Nearly two-thirds of those who die in the U.S. each year from guns are suicides. And in light of all that we see around gun violence, how do we keep guns away from those who mean to do harm - perpetrators of domestic violence, convicted felons, or those who would be a danger to themselves or someone else?

What contributes to it? Does the violence that is so prevalent in our media whether video games, movies, TV, or Internet – and so accessible to people from a very young age – make a difference? As the parent of two kids, I know how easily they can access anything on the Internet even with close monitoring. How are we encouraging people to solve problems without the use of violence?

It's clear that when we read the Gospels, the disciples had weapons. At least on this night when Jesus had gathered them for a meal together, then had taken them to the Garden of Gethsemane, we're told that at least one of them with Jesus had a sword – and so did the group that came with Judas to arrest Jesus. And that one who was with Jesus used his sword to cut the ear of a slave. This account is in all four Gospels.

But Jesus is also clear about how our use of weapons affects our lives. I believe his words and question to the disciples are more about where we place our ultimate trust more than anything else. We have to face the truth that Jesus came with a different agenda than what everyone believes God's Messiah would have. His way wasn't a way of military victory or coming in with strength. His way was self-sacrifice. And when he makes it clear that he won't fight, his followers desert him.

Friends, when it comes to gun violence, I know I don't want it to increase. I want to rely more on the peace that Christ offers than on any weapon. But I get caught up in scenarios – the “what if” moments. What would I do if I was in danger? What would I

do if my loved one was in danger? I'd be dishonest if I told you that it's easy to hear Jesus' call and to imagine him going willingly to the cross. It's not.

It's not easy in a world where every day there's another story of a shooting of innocent people by someone who has a gun. It's not easy when our communities are hurting because of violence. It's not easy as law enforcement seeks to serve and protect, but there are examples where unarmed people are killed. It's not easy when violence seems to be a way of life for some, and so many times, it's our first reaction to solving problems. It's not easy to be confronted with those questions about where we put our ultimate trust. It's not easy as we seek to make LOVE greater than FEAR.

As we've focused on faith and politics, we've also looked at what our United Methodist Social Principles offer. Again, this is not church law, but our best effort to understand contemporary issues in light of our faith in Jesus Christ. So, I offer you a part of what is presented under the heading of gun violence: "In the name of Christ, who came "and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17) and challenged all his disciples to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), we call upon the church to affirm its faith through vigorous efforts to curb and eliminate gun violence."

It goes on to pay special attention to the effect of gun violence around the world, especially as it relates to young people. There is a call to pay attention to the small arms trade and its growth across the world and to promote advocacy and education around issues of gun violence, including supporting legislation to support registration, licensing, background checks, waiting periods when appropriate, and regulation of sales. There's a call for media not to promote the use of guns to children and to stop the graphic depiction and glorification of violence in entertainment.

And it's important to hear this:

"Whereas, in keeping with the spirit of Isaiah 2:4: "God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows, and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war";

Whereas, reflecting the church's traditional role as a place of safety and sanctuary, Therefore, every United Methodist church is officially declared a weapon-free zone."

We heard those words from the prophet Isaiah earlier – this promise of a new day. Is it too much to hope that Isaiah's vision from God can be true? It seems so far off, and yet that's the vision that Isaiah offers from God. That's the hope I have today - not hope in something that can't be done, but hope in God's ability to transform the world through the love of Jesus Christ in those who follow him - even in you and me.

Can you imagine swords being turned into plowshares - weapons of war into instruments of life and peace? There are people doing it. Shaine Claiborne founded an organization in Philadelphia that has, with the help of metal smiths, turned an AK-47 into a rake and a shovel and into small trowels. Any gun that someone will offer, they melt it and turn it into gardening tools.

Someone asked me earlier this week, "So are you going to take our guns away?" No, I'm not. But I hope that we are responsible, law-abiding, safe, and well-trained if we choose to have guns. And I hope that we will be pro-active in advocating for laws that protect people and prevent gun violence as much as possible. I pray that we will seek out ways to curb violence as a way of life starting with ourselves – because I have to be honest about my own tendency toward violence as a solution. I pray that we'd reach out to communities to invest in education, mental health care, and programs that instruct us on how to communicate and care about each other better.

And I'm asking myself and all of us to think about where we put our trust. Is it in leaders? Is it in weapons? Or is it in the One who came that we might have life - life abundant?

May God help us to seek peace in Christ and in no one else, nowhere else, and nothing else. May we seek solutions together and work together to catch God's vision for our world. May we use the faith, hope, and love we have in us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.