

“Memory and Madness”

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Based on Jeremiah 31:15. Rachel Weeps for Her Children

It was, by all accounts, the President’s best speech to-date. Even though he was flanked by local clergy caring for their own community in crisis, it was the *President* who was our pastor-in-chief. It was a memorial service, so he quoted the Scriptures. Then he called forth, with clarity and compassion, the names of those who had died. He spoke of overwhelming promise and potential cut short. He spoke of unparalleled heroism in the face of terror.

He called us to do better. He said we *must* do better. And together in that moment anyone who has half a heart determined that we *would* do better to keep this terror toward the children of God from ever happening again.

As the stunned silence in response to the President’s speech shifted to emphatic applause, those of us who were sitting high up in the bleachers of the University of Arizona basketball arena—we who had gathered with the rest of Tucson for a word of comfort and hope in the wake of a mass shooting and assassination attempt—turned our heads to the ushers who had begun walking up and down the aisles. They passed out navy blue t-shirts that say: *Tucson and America. Together We Thrive.*

I shared the shirt with the children of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church, Tucson, Arizona, where I served as pastor the following Sunday. Some of our children went to school with Christina-Taylor Green, who was killed January 8, 2011. A day that none of us will ever forget.

Our kids were scared. But I assured them that we were not alone. I told them the whole world was with us, thinking of us and praying for us. And it did help to know you were thinking of us and praying for us. Then I told them that the adults of the world would do everything we could to keep them safe. And I meant it!

Once the children had gone up to Sunday School, I turned toward the adults. They were scared, too. Angry. Traumatized. Clamoring for answers. St. Mark’s is known as a “social justice church,” which meant many of our people were ready to march right away for gun safety legislation. I was, too! But, like the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Uvalde, Texas, during their Prayer Night on Wednesday, I refused to go there. *Now is the time to grieve and heal*, I said. *The time to figure out what to do next will come*, I said. *Right now we just need to hold onto each other and onto the God who wants us to be well.*

It is hard to imagine today, but back then we honestly believed the time really would come when the adults of the world would sit down, objectively, in response to our trauma and figure out what to do next. We genuinely believed that a mass shooting and assassination attempt on a sitting U.S. Congresswoman and a federal judge and a nine-year old girl—born on September 11th—would call our country into a time of heartfelt introspection and determined action.

But now here we are. Eleven years, four months, twenty days, and twenty (two) hours later. One Sandy Hook Elementary School later. One Parkland High School later. One Aurora movie theater, one Buffalo supermarket, one El Paso Wal-Mart store, one Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, one Tree of Life synagogue, one Las Vegas music festival, one Charleston AME church ... one Uvalde Elementary School later. And those are just the ones we remember!

That navy blue t-shirt that once brought comfort and hope to a community in crisis now carries little more than a lie. I have gotten so disgusted with the moral failure of our nation's leaders, I threw away that navy blue t-shirt. Because the truth is, we are not together. We are not thriving. We are dying.

It turns out the prophet Jeremiah from our Lesson today knows a thing or two about the moral failure of a nation's leaders. In Jeremiah's time, as in ours, the nation's leaders have co-opted the language of God to build up their own power and privilege, leaving the least among us to suffer the most. In Jeremiah's time, as in ours, their stubborn hearts refuse to be broken by the misery and violence traumatizing the nation.

Jeremiah is furious. He pickets the temple. He denounces the king. He reprimands the complacency of the priests and prophets of glory, who seek to soothe the egos of the powerful by assuring them of God's favor instead of challenging them with God's commandments.

For twenty-three long years, Jeremiah speaks and for twenty-three long years the leaders refuse to hear, until finally Jeremiah decides their fate is sealed. Intercession is no longer possible. And, get this, from that point onward, Jeremiah refuses to pray. He screams, he weeps, he moans, he cries out, but he no longer prays. At some point, even the prophet Jeremiah insists *thoughts and prayers* are not enough.

The one thing Jeremiah never stops doing is calling the nation's leaders to account. He knows it is futile, he knows they will not change, but he never stops speaking up. He never stops speaking out. And neither must we. For the past fifty years the Presbyterian Church as a national denomination has joined with everyone from the Methodists to the Lutherans to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to compel our country to stop sacrificing the children of God to the violence of guns. Year after year we have urged elected officials to regulate guns and ammunition as effectively as we do cars.

We do not say this as a condemnation of responsible gun owners. Many of us are, ourselves, responsible gun owners. We say this because we follow in the footsteps of an early Christian movement that knows all too well what it is to live in a culture of violence. Jesus, himself, grew up with armed guards on the streets, in the schools, at the temple. Jesus, himself, knew the presence of these armed guards in the midst of the people stoked even more resentment and rage than before, as their land of promise and plenty became a bitter police state. Jesus knew it was destroying them. Even his disciples want to reach for the sword.

But Jesus calls us to another way. If you live by the sword, he says, you will die by the sword. If you live by the gun, you will die by the gun. If you hate in response to the hatred with which you are hated, you will become the very thing that you hate. The only way to end the cycle of violence is through non-violent radical love. To that end, the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship has partnered with other organizations devoted to ending gun violence by promoting an initiative called *Guns to Gardens*. This Guns to Gardens initiative trains congregations to host *safe surrender* events for those who are ready to relinquish their weapons. The guns are

dismantled with a chop saw or grinder and the leftover parts can then be forged into garden tools, jewelry, or art.

Those who have participated in the Guns to Gardens initiative have included: a grandfather who had hunting guns from years past but now has grandchildren visiting in the home; a family to whom the police returned a gun after it was used in a suicide; an older person who enjoyed owning guns but no longer feels they can safely operate or handle them; a parent who bought a gun during the pandemic but determined that, with children in the home, a gun poses a greater danger than they had anticipated.

As it turns out, SPC's very own Leslie Williams has been tracking the Guns to Gardens movement and is eager to implement the initiative right here in Shepherdstown. And so am I. Leslie will be offering a preliminary presentation at the next Session meeting about what that could look like. If you are interested in joining with her, please let her know, or you may contact the church office. She has brochures to hand out so you can learn more about this project.

Yes, our souls are in pain, just like Jeremiah's. Yes, it feels futile to keep hoping and praying for our nation's leaders to act. But we are not helpless. And Jeremiah knows that, too. Immediately following his prophetic witness in our Lesson today, the voice of the LORD continues: Quit your moaning and groaning and get to work. *There is hope for your future*, says our God, if you refuse to give up. Turn those swords into plowshares, God says, and *your children shall come back to their own country*.

Let the church say, Amen!