

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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May 29, 2022

Psalm 97, John 17:20-26

When I was twelve years old, my father gave me a small-ish, single-shot, breach-loading Remington shotgun. It was one of those that kind of broke in half in the middle and put the ammunition in and closed it up. One shot.

He took me to a field, far away from the town, and he told me to aim up in the sky. I did. I remember it was sunset, and the sky was orange behind the pine trees all around. I pulled the trigger and the gun kicked back on my shoulder. The flash from the barrel was orange like the sky.

My dad taught me how to handle a gun. For example, there is a button beside the trigger, called the safety. It locks the trigger so the gun doesn't go off by mistake. He said, "Don't push that button and unlock the trigger until you are ready to shoot." He said, "You never, ever ever point a gun at anybody or at yourself, even if it's unloaded. You don't point it at anybody even if you just unloaded it because one of these days it's not going to be."

For my dad and me, guns were not a macho thing. It wasn't like, "Hey, I've got my gun. That makes me a man. I've got my gun, I can kill people. Yeah! I have power, I have identity. I am important." My dad was probably the least macho person in the whole world. For us, shooting was a thing we did together. It was about relationships, and it was about being in nature.

My experience with guns, however differs from my sister's experience with guns. My sister manages criminal court at the county courthouse where she lives. She has

facilitated the trials of many capital murder cases. She will not touch a gun, because she has seen, sometimes again and again on video, what a gun will do.

She and I have different experiences, different feelings. So right now, after the horrible shootings in Buffalo New York and at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, after school shootings in Marjorie Douglas High School in Florida, and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, I really don't know what to say. I find myself at a loss for words.

Which might not be such a bad thing, because there have been so many words, so very many, many words from all points on the political landscape, that I'm kind of sick of words. I am tempted to just sit down and stay silent.

But we are the church. And the church's job is to show Jesus to the world. That's what we do. So what does Jesus say about the shootings at Robb Elementary School? What is Jesus doing?

I think one thing Jesus might do is point to Psalm 97, which we read today, and which talks about false gods. Martin Luther says that a god is something you fear love and trust above all else.

Do you fear guns? Do you fear people who have guns? Do you stay away from certain parts of town because you know people there have guns?

Do you love your guns? I still have a shotgun and a small rifle my father gave me, and I love my father. Does that mean I love my guns?

Do you trust your guns? Do you trust them to keep you safe? Do you trust them to make a statement about who you are, your dignity, your identity your importance as a human being?

People may say, "Guns are important for safety. Police and military use them to protect folks." Yes, yes, of course. But are they what we as Christians trust to keep us safe, to give us dignity and identity and importance as human beings?

No. They're not.

However we may feel about guns, guns are not God. They do not keep us safe. God keeps us safe. God give us identity and dignity and importance, not guns.

Turning around to the other side, if guns are not God, then not guns are not God either. Do you fear gun regulations? Do you fear that someone will take away your guns?

You know, the United States has more mass shootings than any other industrialized, free nation. We are in first place. Between 1998 and 2019, we had 101 public shootings in which more that 4 people were killed. You know who's second place? France. You how many mass shootings they had? Eight.

We are so far ahead, it's not even funny.

So what's the difference between us and them? Is it because they're somehow more virtuous than we are? No. It's because over there, you have to have a license to own a gun. Just like you have to have a license to drive a car.

A car is a dangerous piece of equipment. If you don't know what you're doing you can hurt someone else or yourself with it. So you have to pass a test, and you have to prove that you can handle a car. Then they give you a license.

Driver's licenses are not a government plot to take away our cars. Look at all the cars, driving back and forth on the street. They all have licenses.

These countries have licenses for their guns. No big deal. Except, they also have far fewer gun deaths.

Do you fear gun safety regulations?

Do you love gun safety regulations? Do you trust them, to keep you safe? People may say, "Gun regulations will keep us safer, they're a tool to protect folks." Yes, yes, of course. But are they what we as Christians trust to keep us safe, to give us dignity and identity and importance as human beings?

However we might feel about gun safety regulations, gun safety regulations are not God. They will not keep us safe. They will not give us identity or dignity or importance as human beings. Only God does that.

In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus prays that we be one, as he and the Father are one. Do you think Jesus and God avoided painful subjects like guns because they are afraid it might cause a conflict. Do you think they are afraid of talking about it?

I don't think we have to agree on guns or on anything in order to be one. I think we have to fear, love and trust God in order to be one. Then we will be able to speak respectfully, forgive each other when we slip up, listen carefully to different backgrounds and experiences, and maybe, eventually figure out the next step of what we are called to do.