

Proper 22a: 10/8/17
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In the name of Christ who is our peace. Amen.

“A car is a lethal weapon.”

That phrase was drilled into my head,
but more importantly into the heads of young people,
by a guy named Dave in my former parish in North Branford.
I think he looked upon it as a kind of ministry,
to take young people just learning to drive under his wing and
repeat that mantra: “A car is a lethal weapon.”

He did it because he cared about those kids.
He did it because he felt like it was his Christian duty
to speak out for peace and safety.

And of course he's right – a car *is* a lethal weapon.
I bet I'm not the only one here who's walked away from a car crash
only by the grace of God.
Tragically, we have lost people – young people -- from this parish
to car crashes.

Not to scare you for the ride home, but a car is a lethal weapon.
And so we talk about it. We discuss ways to make it less so.
We enact laws and regulations to promote public safety.

I didn't grow up sitting in car seats or wearing seat belts,
but I'm glad my kids did.
As a parent I appreciate the graduated driving laws,
restricting when and with whom new drivers can drive.
Even my kids who may have balked at them at the time
now admit they're a good idea.

All this doesn't even take into account other restrictions
on the privilege of driving --
testing, training, mental and physical competency, waiting periods.
New ways of designing roadways.
Plus all the new technology on the cars themselves.

The beeping on my new-ish Subaru drives me crazy sometimes, but it's also saved me from backing out of my driveway onto busy South Main Street into a fender bender – or worse.

Thanks to these innovations and common sense regulations, thanks to a change in our cultural understanding of auto safety, a car is now less of a lethal weapon than it used to be.

This past Tuesday a few people gathered here to toll the bells 59 times, representing 59 people who should be with us on this earth today – sitting in church with their families, enjoying the long holiday weekend, doing whatever it is they'd hoped to do to live out the rest of their natural lives.

But we know that those lives were abruptly and tragically and senselessly cut short in last weekend's mass shooting in Las Vegas. We know that those who loved them will never be the same. And we know that the lives of the some 500 people injured, plus countless others traumatized, will never be the same either.

Will ours?

Or will we be like the politicians offering anemic "thoughts and prayers" in the immediate aftermath of such a senseless tragedy, and then go back to business as usual . . . until the next one strikes a few weeks from now?

Will we pretend that we and our loved ones are somehow exempt? I'm pretty sure that those who attended that country-western concert in Vegas last weekend weren't planning on it ending in violence.

Or will we speak up, calmly and clearly, for the safety of ourselves and our loved ones? For our faith in Christ who is our peace?

Will we refuse to allow ourselves and our elected officials to be bullied by the special interests who profit off our bloodshed? The special interests who push and profit off of weapons that sometimes outgun law enforcement sworn to protect us?

Look, I'm from WV – a place where deer hunting is a school holiday!
 The vast majority of my relatives own guns.
 My dad taught me to shoot at tin cans on a friend's farm.
 I understand that guns alone don't kill people
 any more than cars alone kill people.
 But both are lethal weapons.
 And lethal weapons demand calm, thoughtful conversations about
 how to protect public safety,
 how to stop the carnage,
 how to stop the greed that causes the carnage.
 We've made some progress on car safety;
 now it's time to do so on gun safety.

We didn't just ring the bells here last Tuesday,
 we kept the church open all day for prayer and reflection,
 which attracted a goodly number of people –
 some of you and some people who've never set foot in this place before.
 We put out the usual sign, along with an American flag,
 indicating that last week's shooting wasn't only a tragedy for Las Vegas,
 but a *national* tragedy
 for which we all mourn
 and for which we are *all responsible* for
 making sure it doesn't happen yet again.

We live in a violent world.
 Today's gospel with the parable about the tenants beating and stoning
 a series of slaves tells us that.
 The life – and violent death – of Jesus
 foreshadowed in the parable tells us that.
 But the parable, and especially the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,
 tells us that we are to oppose violence, oppose greed.
 To be with Jesus on the side of peace and compassion.

Today's epistle to the Philippians written by our namesake Paul
 shows us exactly how this works.
 Paul's own story goes from one of violently persecuting followers of Jesus,
 to himself being violently persecuted as a follower of Jesus.
 The beautiful letter to the Philippians was written from jail,

not so long before Paul himself would meet a violent death.
His story is a dramatic example of how following Jesus changes us,
emboldens us,
and demands that we not be complacent OR complicit
in the face of violence.

We need to be like that guy, Dave, from North Branford.
We need to see it as our ministry, out of love and compassion,
to warn against gun violence.
We need to repent of the violence in our lives – coarse language, anger,
being quick to judge those who don't look like or agree with us.
We need to inform ourselves, follow Bishops United Against Gun Violence
or Episcopalians Against Gun Violence.
Then faithfully inform our elected officials of our views
on protecting the public from gun violence.

And, yes, we need to offer our thoughts and prayers –
sincerely, passionately -- not just *after* a shooting,
but before, every day, now:
“O Lord, make us instruments of thy peace.”

AMEN.