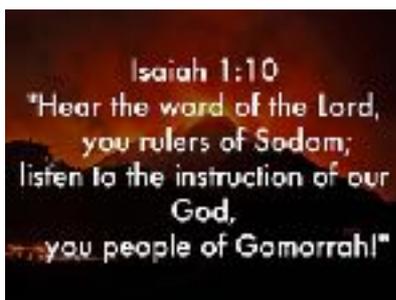


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
“El Paso and Dayton: Consequences, Not Punishments”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Christian Scripture: Luke 12:32-40
Sunday, 11 August 2019

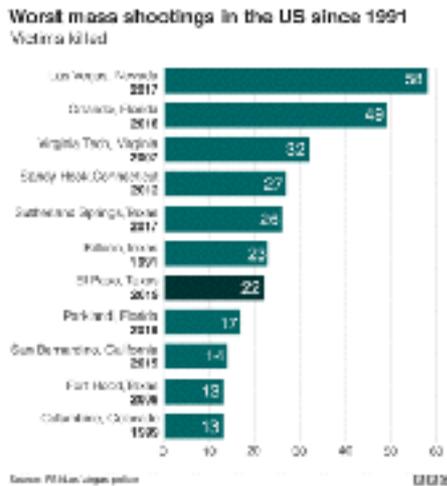


Gosh, that Hebrew scripture was intense, wasn't it? With a harsh prophetic reading like that, perhaps it seems as if I have continued the previous sermon series on prophets. I have not intentionally continued with the prophets; the reading comes straight from the lectionary calendar.



God, through the prophet Isaiah, addresses the people as “you rulers of Sodom; you people of Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:10). From the get-go, I am sure we can tell that someone is not at all in a good mood! God continues on what can only be described as a rant. “The multitude

of your sacrifices, what are they to me?” (Isaiah 1:11) “Stop bringing meaningless offerings!” (1:13) ‘Your festivals and feasts, my soul hates’ (1:14). God spews, “Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen” (1:15).



When I read these words from Isaiah, I can't help but feel deep in my heart that this is what God feels now when, for those in Dayton (10 killed, 27 wounded) and El Paso (22 dead and 25 wounded), we offer *only* our 'thoughts and prayers'.



According to one of many definitions, a 'mass shooting' is a firearm event resulting in at least four people being shot at roughly the same

time and location, excluding the perpetrator.¹ Using this definition, there have been more than 2,000 mass shootings since 2013 in the United States (U.S.), roughly one per day.² The U.S. has had more mass shootings than any other developed country.³ The U.S. has more guns than people.⁴ The U.S. has six times as many firearm homicides as Canada, and nearly sixteen times as many as Germany.⁵ Developed countries with more guns also have more gun deaths.⁶ States with tighter gun control laws have fewer gun-related deaths.⁷ The states with the most guns report the most suicides.⁸ In states with more guns, more police officers are killed on duty.⁹

¹ Wikipedia, Gun Violence Archive, “Report: U.S. Averages Nearly One Mass Shooting Per Day so far in 2017”, *CBS News*.

² “Lopez, German, “America’s Unique Gun Violence Problem, explained in Sixteen Maps and Charts”, *Vox*, 5 August 2019 (accessed 11 August 2019).

³ Palazzolo, Joe; Flynn, Alexis, “U.S. Leads World in Mass Shootings”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2015.

⁴ Lopez.

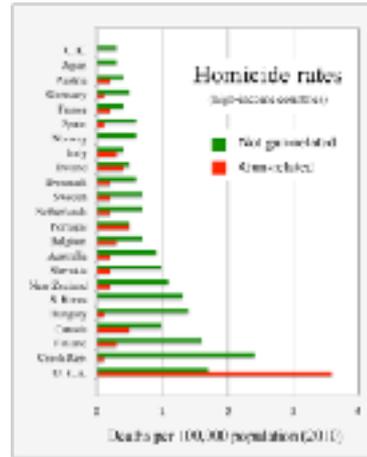
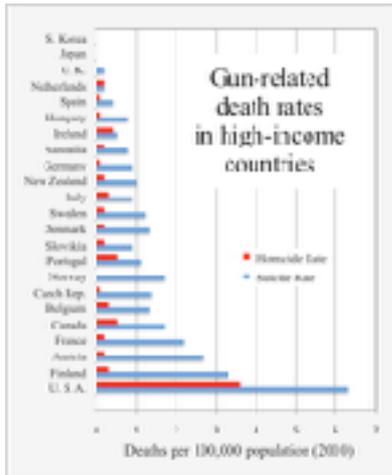
⁵ Lopez.

⁶ Lopez.

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Our country is spiritually, and it is also politically, sick.

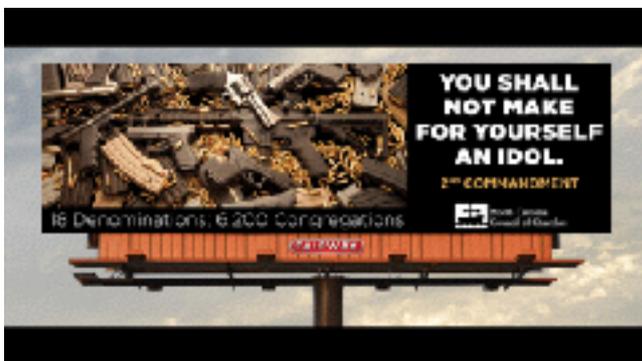
God speaks to us through Isaiah, “When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood” (Isaiah 1:15). Friends in Christ, we are being told this morning that the ‘thoughts and prayers’ offered by us and our politicians on behalf of the victims of our country’s gun violence are odious to God, so much so that even God’s “soul” is driven to “hate” them.



It is useless and insulting to God to lament the death of hundreds and thousands and do nothing politically and legally to decrease the carnage.



Let me make several points in rapid succession. First, a frequent concern of the prophets is idolatry. The United States' constitution and thus the Second Amendment has somehow become a false god, and therefore an idol, in this country.



We are worshipping it. As people of faith, our primary allegiance is to the one true God and the teaching and actions of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Any amendment, in any constitution, is not to hold our country to ransom.



The constitution can be changed if it has become an idol that drives us toward self-destruction. The Second Amendment has become an idol that is worshipped, even above life itself!

Second, we know what the problem is and we know what needs to be done as it concerns gun control. I interviewed many Canadians and South Africans this week. People all around the world, people in Australia and New Zealand, are watching our country and are left aghast at our collective stupidity. Measures can be taken to save lives. Yet, we do nothing. God says to us through the prophet Isaiah, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18).



My children and I have all flown in an airport recently. We must take-off our shoes every time we pass through security to board a

plane because in 2001 some idiot named 'Richard Colvin Read' tried to detonate a bomb in his shoe.



So, for the next eighteen years millions and millions of people all around the world have to forfeit their 'God-given right' to wear shoes. *One* incident resulted in almost twenty years of changed behavior. And today, we have a mass shooting seemingly every day and our nation changes *nothing*.

Yesterday, my kids and I drove to Memorial Park. There, in the intersection, is what? A speed bump.



Why? To slow-down vehicles. Why? To limit the possibility of people, especially children, being struck by cars. Now, why, may I ask, is there not a debate about what causes people to be hit by cars? Do we argue

if ‘the car kills pedestrians’ or do ‘people kill pedestrians’? No! We know what to do! We limit people’s freedom to drive at high speeds. We do not debate whether the people are mentally-ill, whether they are racist, nor whether a speed bump will stop *all* pedestrian deaths! No.



We know that legislative and physical restrictions placed on people’s ability to speed will decrease the chance of pedestrian deaths. It is that simple.



God through the prophet Isaiah pleads with us: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (1:18), *if* you “wash and make yourself clean” (1:16), if you “do away with your evil deeds” (1:16), if you are “willing and obedient” (1:19), if you do something to stop the killings, if you “stop doing wrong, learn to do

right” (1:16)! I believe firmly that the ‘what ifs’ are not divine threats of *punishment*, but rather divine wisdom raising awareness about *consequences*!



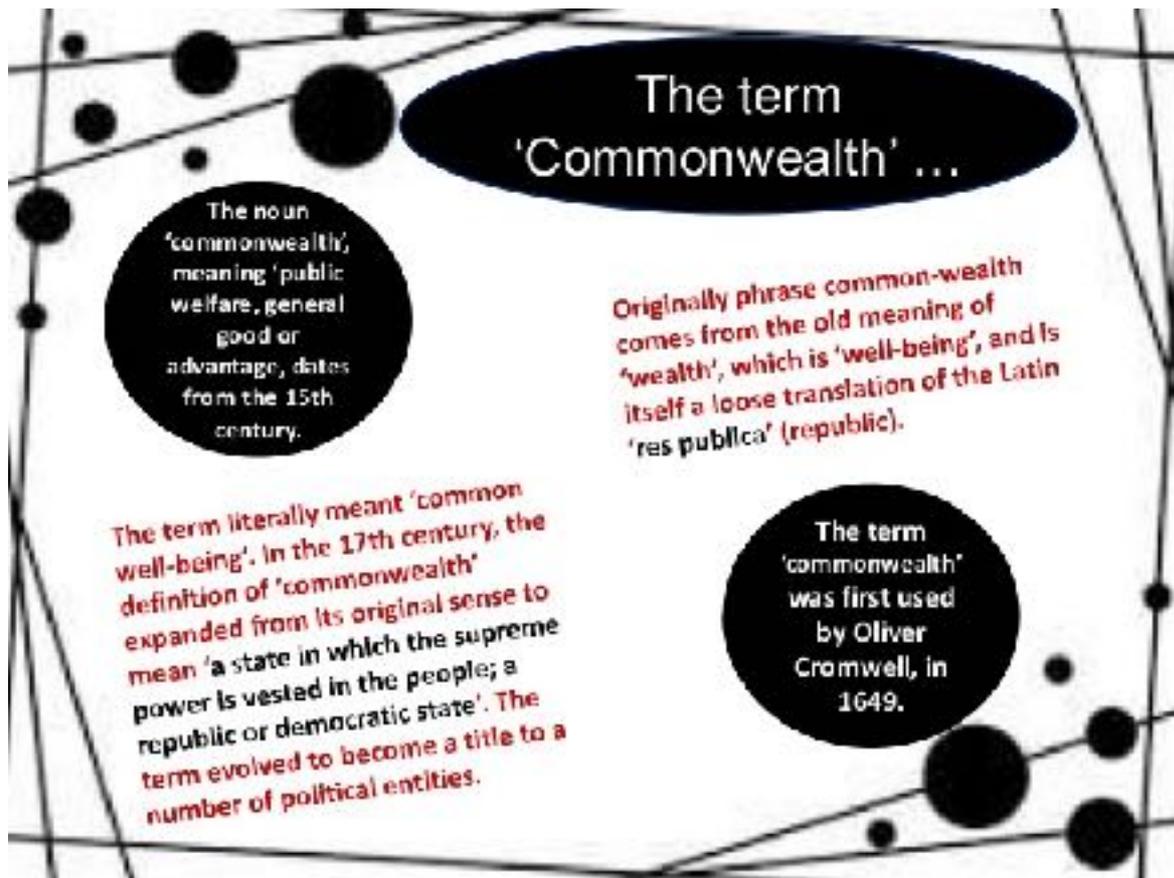
So, our first lesson this morning from the Hebrew scriptures is: Spare God our ‘thoughts and prayers’ and do that which almost all other countries in the world do to limit mass shootings.

Our second lesson derives from the Christian scriptures. The first half of our lectionary calendar provides perspectives about ‘Who is Jesus?’ The second half our lectionary calendar focuses on ‘How are we to follow Jesus?’ Currently, we are focused on the latter and Jesus tells many parables and issues many instructions advising us on how to follow him.



Jesus advised his disciples to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33). Now, if we are honest, many of us in this very church find this instruction unpalatable (myself included), in fact, some of us may even ridicule it. Jesus’ gospel is so radical that most Christians (sadly, myself included, again) secretly or openly argue against his instructions. If we don’t ridicule them, we deflect and question further as did the Rich Man [Young Ruler] and the disciples: “Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?” (Luke 12:41). In other words, is this instruction so generic that we can ignore it?

But, today, I am focusing on gun violence, not poverty. What is instructive for is in Jesus’ teaching is that on which our country used to be premised, and the namesake of the state in which I happened to draft this sermon, Massachusetts: ‘the commonwealth’.



The term 'commonwealth' is synonymous with the word 'republic'.



“I pledge allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stands” is often recited in schools. ‘Commonwealth’ means ‘public welfare, general good or advantage’. Jesus advocates that which the prophet Isaiah did when he said “Learn to do right!” What is right? “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead

the case of the widow” (1:17). Jesus said, ‘Aid the poor’. Yesterday, on behalf of the church, and I hope you approve, I participated in the Homeless Revolution rally in front of Town Hall. Isaiah and Jesus would say that forfeiting what is best for you and giving it to others is for the common good, the commonwealth. This instruction is, one might say, a theologically inspired advocacy for ‘socialism’ - which is what a commonwealth and a republic are. As it concerns gun rights, I would argue that it is in the best interests of our country, and therefore the good of the ‘commonwealth’, for politicians and the citizens they represent to advocate and pass legislation that that seek to limit the carnage of mass shootings and thus limit individuals’ rights to own lethal weapons, particularly large capacity assault rifles.



Let me conclude that both Isaiah and Jesus warn of the *consequences* of doing nothing, of sleeping, of failing to do one’s duty for the commonwealth. In Isaiah’s words, “If you resist and rebel against my advice, you will be devoured by the [guns]”. In Jesus’ words, ‘Don’t sleep. Be alert. Be responsive’ (Luke 12:35). Take

measures to prevent the house from being broken into (12:39).

Yesterday, I dropped-off Micah and Madeline at a concert at the TC Garden in Boston. I texted Micah to protect Madeline. “From what?”, Micah asked? “From men, and bullets”, I responded.

Because the end of our lives can “come at an hour when you do not expect [it]” (Luke 12:40).



This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.