

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford
The Second Sunday of Lent
February 25, 2018
Text: Mark 8:31-38
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

It seems harsh. It sounds as if Peter only wanted to protect Jesus from harm, and Jesus responds with, "Get behind me Satan"? Wow. What did Peter say that was so wrong? Well, quite a bit. Peter held a common misconception about the long awaited Messiah. It was thought that the Messiah would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression and Palestine and its people would be free. Peter was astounded when Jesus told him that there would be suffering and rejection ahead. But Jesus was challenging the powers that be, and when the status quo is threatened, there are consequences.

Peter, like us, would much rather that Jesus' teachings led to an easier life. But instead Jesus is saying he would have to pay the ultimate price. Peter told Jesus not to do it, not to continue along his path if it meant such an end. Jesus tells Peter he is acting like Satan, the one who opposes God. And tells Peter what true discipleship looks like. He says, "If any would be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."

What did Jesus mean that disciples need to deny themselves? Denying oneself might sound like degradation and extreme austerity; hair shirts and all that. But what if by denying ourselves, Jesus meant that we needed to be about the business of becoming more fully our true selves, people who need other people. Discipleship is about turning our orientation in life towards others, towards the good of all, and that often involves giving something up so that others can thrive. Choosing to do the right thing will mean making sacrifices. Parents, teachers, and first responders make sacrifices every day for their children, their students, and the communities they serve. They place the good of others above their own rights or desires.

I saw this kind of courage and selfless sacrifice this week in the actions of the high school students from Parkland, Florida. Instead of nursing their grief in private, they have showed the world their vulnerability, their pain, and their anger in the hopes of changing laws so that no one else will have to suffer as they have suffered. They are pleading with law makers and gun owners to give up automatic weapons so that this country can be a safer place for all people. They are gaining supporters, but they are facing retaliation and threats as well. When the status quo is threatened, there will always be backlash.

Some of this resistance to change is happening because people feel that their rights are being curtailed. Their individual freedom has become the most important value in their lives. And they're feeling defensive because redemptive violence has become an ingrained myth, part of the religion of America. Many Christians in this country have put God and guns together in a

volatile mix. They claim that gun violence is caused by so-called secular values; that because Christianity is no longer taught in schools. They argue that until every American turns to God, we as a nation will not be safe. And so, their argument goes, we need even more guns and more people to be armed, including teachers. I imagine Jesus saying, get behind me Satan.

A church in Pennsylvania is planning a blessing ceremony for automatic weapons this week.ⁱ They claim that AR 15s are mentioned in the Bible, they believe these are the 'rod of iron' mentioned in the book of Revelation, that the Messiah will use to rule when he comes to earth once more. An interpretation such as this- almost sounds laughable doesn't it; as though Jesus will come to us on the last day, packing serious heat. I imagine Jesus saying, get behind me Satan.

A spokeswoman for the National Rifle Association addressed several groups this past week. She has a tattoo on her arm of a verse from Ephesians, "put on the whole armor of God." She says we need Jesus AND automatic weapons to protect ourselves from evil.ⁱⁱ And Wayne LaPierre, the President of the NRA, told a crowd this week that the right to bear arms is "not bestowed on us by man but granted by God to all Americans as our American birthright."ⁱⁱⁱ In his nationalist and materialistic thinking, LaPierre considers America and the Second Amendment to be sacrosanct, holy and blameless in God's eyes. Any criticism of either is to be considered blasphemy. But I imagine Jesus saying, get behind me Satan.

Throughout history, God sent prophets to correct human notions about what is pleasing to God. We are appalled that people would ever believe that they should sacrifice their children to the god of the Ammorites; Molek or Baal, the god of the Canaanites. But our spiritual ancestors fell back into child sacrifice again and again as recorded in Deuteronomy, 1st Kings, Judges, Isaiah, Leviticus, Micah, and Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah declared that God never decreed such a thing or ever thought of it.^{iv} But here we are in 2018, still sacrificing our children on the altar of 'the right to bear arms.' And I can hear Jesus saying "Get behind me Satan."

Jesus stood with the vulnerable and marginalized. He came to show us how God intends for us to live. Again and again, Jesus taught that we should not return violence for violence but that we should love one another, even our enemies. This is not an easy path. But if we want to follow Jesus we will deny our selfishness, take up our crosses and follow the way that Jesus took.

It is the way of the cross, not the way of violence that leads to life, for us, and for our children. Let us pray. Loving God, in the aftermath of violence, we pray for our nation. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want,

provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. *Amen.*^v

ⁱ Washington Post Feb. 26, 2018

ⁱⁱ ABC News Feb.22, 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ The Atlantic, Feb. 22, 2018

^{iv} Jeremiah 19:5

^v From the BCP p. 817 Prayers for the Church