

Date Preached	26-Jun-2022	Date Initiated	07-Jun-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 8, Yr C

" [D]o not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
but, through love, become slaves to one another. "



It is, I think, time to talk about guns. I have heard—literally from my very first interview with the vestry two years ago—that St Andrew's has a long practice of excluding politics¹ from sermons. Our parish family is fortunate to comprise members from across the political spectrum, and in staying away from 'hot button' issues, we avoid polarization and division ... and this parochial peace is to the good.

And ... And, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the existential threat guns pose to our nation and its future.

- In 2020, there were over 19,000 homicides-by-gun—fully 79% of all homicides committed.²
- Per capita, there are 120 guns in this this country for every 100 men, women and children who live here—more than *double* the rate of any other nation on earth.³
- In 2019, 2.4 million Americans bought a gun for the first time. And then, between January 2020 and April 2021, another *5.1 million* people became first-time gun owners.⁴
- Every 25 days, the number of lives lost to guns⁵ in this country is equivalent to Kent's whole population.⁶

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There is no shortage of talk about guns these days. Politicians debate. Social scientists report. Lawyers argue. Commentators blather. Compromises are proposed ... lines are drawn ...

¹ As a formal matter, I distinguish *politics*—the partisan pursuit of civil authority—from topics of broader social / communal interest. Jesus had nothing to say, so far as I know, about the election of any particular candidate. He did, however, have *a lot* to say about how people can (and should) live with, and for, one another.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/homicide.htm>. The rate of gun-use in homicides in other nations is hugely lower. They are used in only 37% of homicides in Canada; 13% in Australia; and 4% in the United Kingdom. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>. The Falkland Islands clock in second, at 62 guns per 100 residents—one-half of our rate. *Id.*

⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-12-21/5-million-more-americans-became-gun-owners-during-pandemic>.

⁵ *I.e.*, both homicide and suicide.

⁶ As of the 2020 census, the population was 3,019.

and little, if anything, meaningful happens, until the next (and inevitable) Sandy Hook or Las Vegas or Uvalde.⁷

But there's one voice we do *not* hear in all this fruitless bloviating, and it's the one that's most important: God's. As Christians ... as people who seek to know and love God and do God's will ... we're compelled to ask: What is *God's* 'take' on guns?

As I asked myself this question, I must admit that I struggled a bit. My initial, perhaps knee-jerk, answer was that, for God, guns are evil: a mass-produced, widely distributed human attempt to arrogate to ourselves the power of life-and-death ... of wholeness-and-injury ... that is rightly God's alone. When we use a gun to kill or injure while committing a crime ... or threaten those whose views we don't respect ... or express moral outrage or visceral hatred ... or, catastrophically, to end our own life ... the bullets we fire ↓ dispense death, dismemberment and disability that God cannot *possibly* have intended us to inflict upon one another. Guns let us vent, concentrate and magnify the evil that lurks within our hearts in ways that vex and sorrow God, no end.

On the other hand—and, in truth, it took preparing this sermon to make me realize there *is* an "other hand!"—in the right hands and the right circumstances, guns can ... however grossly or bluntly ... sometimes *further* God's purposes of justice, compassion and mercy. When a police officer uses a gun to prevent a homicide ... when an army uses guns to halt the march of a cruel or depraved despot ... when a hunter uses a gun to kill an animal for food or a farmer uses one to kill animals that are destroying vital crops ... we use our God-given gifts of reason, empathy and agency for *good*. Please do not mishear me: God takes no pleasure in *any* creature's death. But God can, and does, weigh the *intent* behind every firing of a gun ... and recognizes, as a 'net benefit,' the justified, proportionate and last-resort use of guns that express God's wider love for all humankind.

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God's approach to guns may be textured—may not be a blanket rejection—but it is also not equivocal: God's bias is *always* toward peace ... toward compassion ... toward *love*. And in his letter to the Galatians, St Paul gives us two checklists we can use to determine whether our own actions and attitudes are toward God's holy love ... or toward the self-indulgent and self-destructive ways of this world.⁸ If we are moving toward God's love, Paul tells us, our actions will be characterized by "joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, ... gentleness and self-control." If, on the other hand, we're moving *away* from God's love, our acts will engender "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions [and] envy."

What do we see, then, when we use these two lists to ask whether this country's current approach to guns is a path toward the holy love of God ... or toward the self-indulgence of human will?

- ENMITY is outstripping KINDNESS, it seems to me, in a country that suffered 693 mass shootings last year, which killed more than 700 and injured almost 3,000 more.⁹

⁷ I am not unthankful for the bill that was passed in Congress and the President signed this past week. But it really is a least-common-denominator approach to gun safety. I have serious doubts that the effect of its provisions, which substantively are either on the margins of the core issues that bedevil us or are mere invitations to states to do something, on gun killings in this country will be significant ... and that's assuming it survives the myriad legal challenges to it that are probably already in the works.

⁸ In Paul's parlance, these are the ways of the "Spirit" and of the "flesh," respectively.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mass_shootings_in_the_United_States_in_2021.

- STRIFE is defeating SELF-CONTROL when, as in a very recent *two-week period*, there were more than 1,600 shootings in the United States ... that killed 1,800 people and wounded almost 500 more.¹⁰
- FACTIONALISM is crowding out a spirit of GENEROSITY in a nation where a sitting member of Congress tells the following 'joke' at a rally and gets laughs: "They like to say: 'Oh, Jesus didn't need an AR-15. How many AR-15s do you think Jesus would have had?' ¶ 'Well, He didn't have enough to keep His own government from killing Him!'"¹¹
- DESPAIR is overtaking GENTLENESS when, as in 2020, more than 24,000 American families were plunged into hellacious agony by the gun-suicide of a spouse, parent, child or sibling.¹²

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Guns and a gun-culture¹³ are moving this nation steadily away from the love of God and of others that Jesus taught us.¹⁴ The massive proliferation of guns across our society ... the lightly-to-un-regulated ownership and use of guns in many states ... the insidiously creeping 'normalcy' of scenes of mass murder and reports of wanton violence in the daily news: These are *not* "joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, ... gentleness and self-control." They are *away* from the love of God, and *toward* the hot passion and cold cruelty of human will ... and they vex and sorrow God, no end.

As Christians—as followers of Christ's example and proclaimers of His message—we *must* think long and hard *about* that example and that message ... and then speak out ... ¶about who should be able to purchase guns, and when ... ¶about what guns, gun accessories and ammunition should be available for purchase ... ¶about how guns should be stored ... ¶about who should be held liable for the use of guns to commit crimes ... ¶about how the mental and emotional health of gun owners should be assessed ... ¶about places where it should—and should *not*—be appropriate to carry a gun.

So often, we couch our discourse about guns in terms of freedom—specifically, the freedom, under the Second Amendment, to bear arms. But that's a worldly, self-defensive—sometimes self-*indulgent*—freedom.

The freedom of *God*, by contrast, we find in the Sixth *Commandment*: "Do not murder one another," God instructs us, "because I hold in My loving, caring hands the life of every single human

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/briefing/gun-violence-shootings-chicago.html>.

¹¹ <https://finance.yahoo.com/finance/news/lauren-boebert-jokes-jesus-could-201107696.html> (Rep Lauren Boebert of Colorado).

¹² <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>.

¹³ I refer, loosely, to the "don't tread on me" / "watch out for Number 1" / "beware the camel's nose" mindset that is growing more and more common in the United States. It is convinced that it is always right; always justified; and, more often than not, doing the express will of God. In its estimation, compromise, moderation and balancing-of-interests are all anathema.

¹⁴ See Luke 10:27-28.

being." May all Christians, I pray, join together to lead this nation away from the *false* freedom of **guns in the hands of men** ... and into the *true* freedom of **love, in the hands of God**.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*