



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Taboo Topix, Pt 3:
Clean Hands, Pure Heart*

Psalm 24:1–6; Psalm 90:12–17

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PSALM 24:1–6

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for God has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.*

*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*

*Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

A PREACHER AND A PISTOL

Clean hand, pure hearts. I know some of you were here for it. 34 years ago, in the fall of 1985, Pastor Earle Fike Jr preached a stirring, but disturbing, sermon about guns, entitled “The work of our hands.” During this sermon he reached into the pulpit and pulled out a handgun. He then explained the scourge of handgun violence in the 1980s: 11,500 murders, 300,000 robberies, rapes and assaults with handguns, 12,000 killed in accidents and suicide with handguns.

I wonder if Pastor Fike would have thought that 34 years later it wouldn't be handgun violence on the streets that we are most concerned about, but rather high capacity, semi-automatic rifles used to murder high numbers of people in Walmarts, movie theaters, and most shockingly of all, schools.

What Pastor Fike didn't know then was that 34 years later kids would be wearing bullet proof backpacks to school. That our teachers and administrators in those schools would be leading the children in lockdown and “active shooter” drills. According to the Education Department “Nearly every American public school now conducts lockdown drills—96 percent in 2015 and 2016.

2 If you don't know what a lockdown drill is, let me explain. It's the same as a fire drill, but instead of preparing for a building evacuation in the event of a fire, you prepare for a mass murderer entering the school and going on a rampage. You don't evacuate the building, you hunker down, get out of sight lines. You prepare your defense. And pray he doesn't choose your hallway.

Teachers talk to the kids about where they will hide, and what they will do, and how they will resist should the person get into the room. At parent-teacher open houses, teachers now have to assure parents that they've thought these things through, and some of them go so far as to describe their willingness to lay down their lives for our kids. Welcome to school; I hope it's a good year.

Our scriptures this morning talk about the work of our hands...Our math teachers hands are busied doing the calculations on the distance between the hiding places in the room and the steps to the door and the physics of what they will use to break an attacker's arm if they reach through the window in the door to unlock it from the inside. Science teachers have figured out which noxious chemicals and acids at the ready to throw on a would-be shooter. This is not hyperbole. Each of these examples come from the Davidson Laszakovits experience in our Elizabethtown schools.

And of course, this literally haunts our children's dreams. Some children miss days of school due to crippling anxiety that this will happen. And who can blame them?! We all know these massacres by their school names: Sandy Hook Elementary School: 20 first graders and six teachers and staff massacred (I will always remember their ages because they were the same grade as my daughter Julia—they would be 8th graders this year). Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School: 17 slaughtered. Columbine, Colorado: 15 dead. And those are just the big ones.

I wanted to take an abundance of caution as to not alarm kids. Fact of the matter though is that, they are probably more accustomed to these conversations than the rest of us as they

practice these drills in school. The purest of hands, the cleanest of hearts forced to deal with what the adults can't quite figure out.

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So where does this leave us as people of faith? Tempted as we might be to debate gun laws, magazine capacity, how to define an automatic or semi-automatic weapon, waiting periods before buying a firearm, who can have a gun, what laws to require for safe storage, and on and on. We are not going to do that this morning. Instead, we are going to think about this as people of God, followers of Jesus.

What is the appropriate Christian response? What is the appropriate Christian response when we have to teach our kids duck and cover in their schools? What is the appropriate Christian response when we know the following statistics:

- 36,000 Americans are killed by guns each year—an average of 100 per day.⁴
- 100,000 Americans are shot and injured each year.⁵ (about 300 per day)
- Gun deaths increased by 16% from 2014 to 2017.⁷
- The US gun homicide rate is 25 times that of other high-income countries.¹⁸
- The US gun suicide rate is 10 times that of other high-income countries.¹⁹
- Women in the United States are 21 times more likely to be murdered with a gun than women in other high-income countries.²⁰

So as we've done throughout this series, let's take a look at the things that are happening in the real world and what our scriptural tradition might have to say about them. Because we want to take a bigger view than what the politics of the day might tell us. We want to have integrity as people of faith.

4

Psalm 24, that I read earlier, frames this question of integrity this way: **Who can come to God in worship? And what state must we be in when we do come to God in worship?** The answer was clear: It is those who have clean hands and pure hearts. It is those who do not lift their souls to what is false. Those who do not swear deceitfully. These are not ambiguous, metaphysical terms of engagement with God; they are ethical mandates for how we treat those around us.

No doubt, the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, is also filled with example after example of times when God's people used violence. Also, the Hebrew Bible is filled with rules upon rules about when and where violence may, and may not, be used.

But then, we have Jesus. *'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

I find one of the hardest part of Jesus' teachings are those that time and again call for nonviolence, even in the face of violence. And we remember that these weren't just words in a vacuum. Jesus preached nonviolence, even under the threat of his own personal safety AND while his people lived under Roman occupation. Jesus could have encouraged his followers to join the rebel forces against unjust Roman rule. For Jesus the way of clean hands and pure heart was the way on nonviolence.

Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39)

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. (Matthew 26:52)

And on and on Jesus goes. Then, as if this weren't enough, Jesus was true to his preaching, never responding in violence even when arrested, tortured and killed. I'm not saying this is easy. I'm telling you what Jesus said, and did.

Now, this is the part where we need to be very clear that just because Jesus advocated for us not to fight back with physical violence, he did stand up for himself and others. We're going to talk more about this next Sunday when we consider Christian Pacifism, but I want to be crystal clear: Committing to a life of nonviolence in Jesus' way is **not** the same as giving up, or allowing someone else to do whatever they want to you or your loved ones.

I am going to say that again because it is often lost on a culture where violence is seen as the solution to our problems. Committing to a life of nonviolence in Jesus' way is **not** the same as giving up, or allowing someone else to do whatever they want to you or your loved ones. It is laying down violence and revenge as the tools for justice and replacing them with tools that will win a lasting peace.

So where does all of this leave us with guns? In relation to firearms and gun violence, I think we can easily make the following conclusions. There is nothing wrong with a properly trained person possessing a firearm that is intended for hunting or target shooting. But...if that firearm is kept or held with the intention that it will be, or even could be, used against another person, that is clearly against Jesus way of non-violence and love of enemies. And furthermore—and I'll admit this is where it gets difficult if we place gun-owner rights above the common good, then we are outside the clean hands, pure heart mandate.

LET'S NOT LOWER OURSELVES TO LABELING AND EXTREMIST VIEWPOINTS

Throughout this Taboo Topics series we have talked about challenging issues from the Christian perspective. The goal has been to challenge ourselves to think about these loaded topics from our perspective as people of faith, rather than political affiliation or interest group. Today, I'd like to dwell a moment on how we talk about these issues with one another.

An example: Over the years, I have had several conversations with a dear member of the congregation, Dennis Wade. Dennis and I don't see gun control the same way. But we have entered the conversation in good faith, discovered shared

6 values, noted common goals, and challenged one another gently, in good faith.

Dennis and I have affirmed one another as people of conviction. Thoughtful, caring, service-oriented people. So before this sermon I wanted to touch base with Dennis. When we sat down on Thursday, we spoke at length about how we view gun violence as people of faith. And we left not only with increased respect for one another, but also respect for this congregation. We may not always agree on everything. But we agree on enough to live together as sisters and brothers in faith, and act boldly from our unity.

One of the most helpful lessons I've learned in my conversations with people I may disagree with is that we should never ascribe intent to another person's viewpoints. I know it's how our politicians talk "They don't want you to be safe" "Not all gun control advocates think the solution is to outlaw every single firearm worldwide." Likewise, not every Second Amendment proponent argues zero gun control.

And again we return to the Psalmist for guidance.

PSALM 90:12–17

*So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*

Turn, O Lord! How long?

Have compassion on your servants!

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.*

*Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*

*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands —
O prosper the work of our hands!*

May God prosper the work of our hands. The words from our lips. And the intentions of our hearts.

