

“Disarm or Die”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 8/25/19

Genesis 4:1-10; Matthew 26:47-52

What I am about to preach is not easy. And though I have danced around it on many occasions, it is a cause for which I have blatantly chosen in the past to not be in the lead on, but yet to cheer from the shadows. And for this, I must personally repent. I was wrong. I have not done enough to see this issue through to its ultimate end: The disarmament of noncombatants. There is also the issue of armed combatants but I will not even think to broach that topic today. My own indoctrination into gun culture begins with my father who during the first two years of my life was notably around. He would always tell the story of how I as a two year old shocked him by my athleticism and tenaciousness, climbing to the very top of his bedroom closet one day in search of hidden Christmas toys. The shock was less about the toys and more about the loaded Colt .22 that he had stashed at the top of closet alongside the presents. It shook him so badly that he told me he immediately retrieved all of his guns (apparently he had more stashed throughout the house), and sold them the very next day.

This, however, was short lived I suppose, with my sister and I not growing up with him much after those initial years. I remember as a new teen, though, driving in the truck with him a few years later, and opening the glove box to find a shiny pistol staring back. Later, as I reached into the seat, fishing for the seat belt, I felt the cold touch of steel—which happened to be from another small pistol cleverly hidden. I asked him about it, “Dad, why all the guns?” His reply was short and to the point, “You never know.” Though the reply short, my dad revealed a lot about his own struggles, namely fear. He feared the worst. His own father, a preacher, had carried a handheld .22 in his car – just in case. His brother, who would go on to become a prominent gun dealer, regaled stories of clutching his pistol, cocked and ready, in the car while traveling through “less than desirable” parts of the city. In each case, the issue was clear: Fear. The gun somehow alleviated that fear, made them feel empowered, like they had recourse in case things went wrong.

And as surprising as this may seem, or not, there were often racial undertones connected to the fear itself. Typically in any one of my family member’s personal stories, as storytelling has been an art in our home for generations, the person who loomed in the background as the most sinister, villainous – the one who moved them to clutch their weapon even tighter, was often unsurprisingly what they would refer to as “a large black man.” These stories changed slightly over the years... in the 80’s the N-word was still predominantly being used, and over time the caricature reference morphed into simply “large black man,” of course lingering on the “black” part when wanting to really evoke fear in their impromptu singularly white audience. And it worked. The emotion of fear was transmitted perfectly. It may surprise you that guns have a racial connection historically, and most especially in the South.

The only ones armed were whites historically, especially in the South. Militias were the ultimate line of defense for communities, and in the South they also functioned as Slave patrols, keeping the enslaved in their place with the use of check points and search parties. They were a menacing, terrorizing ban of people armed to the teeth and deathly afraid of the “large black man.” Stories of insurrection and slave rebellions were always in the air, and these militia were proactive in safeguarding their way of life. This is not conjecture but blatant fact. And there is little surprise that it is the predecessor of a spirit of self-determination by weapons to protect oneself from the once again proverbial “large black man.” Though

not spoken out loud. It is hard to argue that it is not pervasive in the very culture itself. I have been in meetings with white pastors who debate whether to have a gun at the pulpit or not (and the “large black man” threat is carefully tiptoed around)—of course their threat does not typically flesh out within the context of reality but is often grounded in historical fear, and I have been at meetings with black pastors where they talk about keeping a gun at the pulpit too, but their story is based on a reality that we’ve seen played out in our lifetime too many times—where people of color have been targeted specifically because of their race.

My reading of Scripture taught me as a young man that we as Christians are not to take up arms. Jesus’ own words from the Garden of Gethsemane ring in the background, “To live by the sword is to die by the sword.” It was a clear admonishment of the self-defense and defense-of-your-loved-one argument. However, this runs counter intuitive for most of us. Since Cain killed Abel there seems to be an easiness to taking the life of another. I remember getting into heated debates with other church members and even leaders over the years on this very issue. They’d say, “If someone had your wife and children at gunpoint, tell me you wouldn’t shoot that person, Dan...” – that was the scenario presented to me over and over. I would, much to their disappointment, simply respond, “No, I wouldn’t shoot them.” It angered my fellow believers beyond comprehension. They wanted me to admit my weakness, just like they did openly, proudly—proud gun owners and gun-toters. They wanted me to admit that I needed that gun in order to protect that which is most precious to me.

Well, I *am* weak. However, I have made a conscious choice for my weakness not to depend on a gun. Would I fight to defend my family? *Possibly*. But I will not use a gun, and by keeping the option off the table, out of my home, I have chosen not to be confronted with the temptation. This has been a personal stance, mostly private, not a public one, and not one that I have taught or imposed on others. However, Jesus was clear on the subject, if you choose to have weapons—your end will be by the same weapon. Simply said, you reap what you sow. If you sow peace, you will reap peace. If you sow violence, you will reap violence.

Ruth and I were sickened when from our living room while in seminary in California we watched the events unfold at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO in 1999. There we clutched our two tiny sons at the time, in disbelief that people would plot and carry out such an attack on their fellow students. However, hate is real. Twelve years later when we would live in that very same community, know the victims personally, and those same two sons would attend Columbine high school themselves—we remained alert to the idea that this could happen anywhere. By then, the Virginia Tech shooting had already happened, only an hour from my father’s blissful farm... or the Sandyhook Elementary shooting, where so many innocent children had died innocently. And then the Aurora theater shooting happened near where we lived in Colorado, several of my employees were in the theater that night, but had made it out alive. Others of their friends did not. Not long after just down the road at Arapahoe High School another school shooting happened. This time only two would die, the shooter and the brave student, Claire, who tried to stop him. We attended the mass memorial for Claire in Denver—I secretly vowed I would do everything I could to stop this insanity and provide safety for this generation. Then not long after, as a pastor in Southwest Virginia, responding to the Charleston shooting one summer and then the Pulse Nightclub shooting the next, I saw a very targeted hate of anything and anyone considered “other,” whether they be a different race or a different sexual orientation, I decided not to be silent anymore. I worked hard within our community toward racial reconciliation and to stand against intolerance and inequity targeting the LGBTQ+. We rallied. We marched. We prayed. We marched. We

rallied. We debated. We stood in solidarity with those most marginalized and I'd like to think we made a difference. Only time will tell that, of course.

Then God called me and my family here. I believe it was no accident. Anything but. Charlottesville August 12, 2017 marked my first action as pastor, vested in robes, and standing in the middle of a clergy action of peace in Emancipation Square against what cannot be describe as anything but violent hate. I was there to give aid where I could, both physically and spiritually. And yet it scared me what I witnessed that day, these young, well dressed, white youth, bowling over elderly, yet courageous clergy members, and they were spewing hateful slogans, born out of fear—fear of being marginalized themselves, swelled up with an instinctual desire to self-preserve. The hate, however, I heard with my ears and witnessed with my eyes was overwhelming. So much so, that I immediately began reaching out to clergy friends back in Southwest Virginia. The young people I had seen looked like many I had known in that part of Virginia, a twisted sort of theology had somehow been left unchecked. Some of my pastor friends reacted immediately and decried Charlottesville immediately from the pulpit. But, the pastors with the largest congregations, the most to lose, were unwilling. One said to me, "I don't think anyone from my church thinks that way." He obviously didn't understand that this kind of ideology lurks everywhere and if we don't explicitly call it out, it will seem like we are giving it a pass.

Two years later. And now while my most precious treasures in this life, my wife Ruth and our daughter Mumu, were in El Paso for the second time this summer giving aid and comfort to my quickly ailing mother-in-law, a tragedy so real proportionate to the hate I had witnessed occurs nearby. While Ruth and Mumu brought light and love to Ruth's hurting family when they needed it the most, and a young man who felt that same hate I had witnessed two years earlier surge into uncontrollable anguish play out in his targeted killing of people that look like my wife and children in the same vicinity as my wife and daughter. How can this be? I cried out to God. I was grateful that they were spared. For they had intended to stop at that very Walmart that very morning to grab some cleaning supplies while on her way to her parent's home. However, for some reason, they missed the exit and ended up at a Target two exits down the road instead. Thank God!

Using a similar style assault weapon that has already been used in so many mass shootings, the killer picked off his targets easily, spraying bullets into the crowded store and parking lot. So many died. Not unlike Dayton, Parkland, Springfield, Vegas, and so many others—however this one was too close to home. Though members of my family own these very weapons themselves, and some deal in such weapons, I encourage each of you to examine your own relationship with guns in general. Are they really for hunting? Is self-preservation an excuse to arm yourself to the teeth? These are hard questions. For some of us, they are easy, because we do not own them and we do not condone owning them. But by being silent on the issue aren't we in a way giving a pass to their prevalence in our society? Aren't we, by our saying "to each their own" (which has long been my own position on the issue), aren't we saying that it's okay? It's okay to have assault style weaponry? I encourage us all to disarm. Stand down. Put our weapons away, and convert them into plowshares. They were born out of fear. And perfect love casts out all fear. We will be the children God has called us to be, ones who prefer peace to war. We are the peacemakers, and should not shirk our duties. However, such ideological practices require individual consent. Search your hearts, search your very essence, your core. Find what it tells you. And then join me in a fight to see such hate erased with love, such propensity towards violence replaced with acts of kindness. Let our only fight be that of seeking justice and compassion, love and mercy. Let us be God's children today and every day, and let us suffer alongside those who suffer, weep with those who weep. I

had spoken in a Spanish speaking church in El Paso this past week, and I asked for forgiveness for the White Supremacy that is dominant in our culture, when we think ourselves better than another, a culture better than another, our language better than another. Let us be different. Let us change. Let us put down our weapons of pride, war, self-preservation and arm ourselves with the mantra of the prophets “do justly, walk humbly, love mercy.”

Shalom/paz