

"The Story of Christmas"

Rev. Chip Wright

Nine days to Christmas now and the orange jack-o-lanterns are long past. The feasts of thanksgiving are just memories as the longest night of the year approaches. The yellow-browns of fall are almost gone and the reds, whites and greens of the Christmas celebration are set up against the muted browns and grays of winter.

My heart has also darkened as I imagine many of yours have as well, saddened to the core at the occurrence last Friday at Sandy Hook School in CT. Tragic deaths and unfathomable pain brought on by such pointless violence.

I can't even come close to imagining how hard it must be for the parents and friends of those kids in Sandy Hook. Or how many years will need to pass before they will ever see a Joyful Christmas season again, if ever. What was going to be a magical winter's season for those families has turned bitter dark, and spread a cloud of disheartening truth across the season and our nation.

Originally this Sunday was going to be about all the varied and diverse stories that make Christmas as we know it. But Friday afternoon when I started to write this Sunday's sermon I found myself unable to go there.

Rather I needed to speak out about this kind of senseless violence which has become almost a regular occurrence of our collective experience, not only here in the United States

but worldwide. Sweden, Britain and China have all seen incidents of this kind, in their schools in the last year.

This nature and level of violence we are seeing is something we all would like never to think about, but we must, because we care, and we feel compassion. And if we are to do anything, to act in any way, to heal these types of occurrences we must not only think about it but we must not forget it or any incidents of these kinds that have scarred our souls, the soul of our nation and world.

When we do remember to think about it, we are reminded of many other times that were like this, where the day was given to pointless tragic happenings. And we cry, as well we should, for that is to be human, as it is also to want to change things so these kinds of incidents stop.

What happened on Friday with the mass shooting of those young school kids and the other victims is a story that will be tied to this Christmas of 2012 for a long time. As much as we would wish it were not. More frightening is that stories like this could become even more common in the twenty-first century if we continue on in the ways we have been going.

You know, I am so thankful for the Christmas images embedded in my soul from the past with my family, my grandparents. Christmas was a time that was rich and fun, about family, music and singing. It was a time for hunting up a yule log that would burn all night and fit in our little fireplace. And of cutting a Christmas tree and bringing it

home to decorate. Hanging stockings from the fireplace mantle and stringing popcorn and cranberries to hang on the tree. And best of all drinking hot chocolate with white marshmallows floating on top. Memories that bring a smile; we all have these.

But as the years have passed and the commercial market driven season of today's Christmas has all but left those experiences to stand only in memory, I cherish them even more because I can no longer see them happening for most kids. Things which once made Christmas for me are now so obscured, if not totally removed, that memories of this season and the nurturing sweetness of the Christmas' I grew up with are nothing like what can be found today.

I struggle with watching my grandkids at Christmas, who have a completely different understanding of this time than I did growing up. Thinking of course, like all us grandparents do, about what they are missing. And my son and his wife are really good parents, devoted and caring.

But the ambient truth of Christmas now is that it is a market time, another slice of the GDP picture, inextricably bound to the nation's economy. One of the most important measures we now have of our national economy is Christmas sales. The magic of the yule log and the sweet smelling Christmas tree of my childhood Christmas have been translated into sterile return on investments, employment rates and market demands.

In this rapidly changing culture of ours, in my lifetime,

Christmas has become the most money driven time of the year, not only a time of stress for many but a breaking point for some. And this is not new; it has always had this effect to some degree when folks give themselves over to the expectations of Christmas rather than the magic.

But what this event in Sandy Hook School says to me, is that the avarice and the greed that has redefined Christmas has also made a world where this type of pointless violence is not only growing but supported at the highest levels of our government.

And it is in this truth that the story I tell today is found. We have given over so much to the frenzied dance of money in our culture that even blatant happenings that call us to look at what we are becoming, like last Friday's event, are dismissed, seen as isolated aberrant behaviors. But like climate change we all know it is not.

When violence threatens to destroy human dignity, to rip away at precious life, we cannot stand by.

The violence which is happening around us is not an isolated aberrant behavior of some crazed, barely human being. These shootings in Sandy Hook, or in the Oregon shopping center a few week before, or the shootings in Florida of the young teens just walking the streets, of the Congresswoman and supporters in Arizona, Columbine High School in Colorado and numerous others that have occurred in recent memory have two things directly in common. One is availability of guns; the other is the

unavailability of mental health support and care.

Listen closely to the statistics comparing the United States availability of guns and their effects to what other nations experience. This information has not been widely shared in the US and so you may not know. Most people do not know, because it is a conscious priority by some to keep the information quiet.

This year handguns killed 8 people in Great Britain, 21 in Sweden, 34 people in Switzerland, 48 people in Japan and 48 in Germany, 52 in Canada, 58 in Israel, and 10,728 in The USA.

Over the last 25 years in our nation, the number of states that now allow concealed weapons has grown from 6 to 49. There are only two states left where concealed weapons are illegal, and they are embattled in the courts to bring down their restrictions. They are the District of Columbia and Illinois. All the rest of the states now either issue concealed weapons permits or have no restrictions.

It is estimated that there are over eight million concealed weapon permits active in the United States at any given moment. Florida alone has issued, to date, two million thirty one thousand one hundred and six active concealed weapons permits.

The handgun trade is a huge business, as is the whole firearms trade. Yet year after year we not only continue to let it grow but we remove restrictions and accountability

wherever possible.

This is largely due to the NRA, one of the best funded of all lobbying groups. They make sure that information about the gun trade in the United States is hard to get. That is because they do not want us to know much about it. And the best way to keep information out of the public domain is to:

One: Make laws that support layers of privacy, or work for institutions who already have such protections, or

Two: Offer the public so much information about other things they make to seem important so the public doesn't have the time to think about what they don't want them to. Both these strategies are in heavy use today.

The NRA works for armaments manufacturers and dealers who make sure they have the resources to keep them free, as well as rifle enthusiasts which are politically important to keep them looking as if they are a populace driven and funded organization.

In turn, the armament manufacturers, work for governments and make their money on conflict. They get paid inordinate amounts of money to produce and develop weapons; money that governments collect in taxes from us, and a not insignificant portion of which they pay their NRA lobbyists to keep their machine well-greased.

I know it is disconcerting but it is true. In the end we are funding the NRA with our tax dollars, and we have been all along whether we support what they are doing or not. And

so guns are everywhere, easy to find and just as easy to use.

And then there is that other piece I spoke about earlier, mental health support. We have not had any viable system in place there since Ronald Reagan cut funding for it first in California and then in the nation. By the time Reagan was finished being President, for all practical purposes, there was no public system that could viably help the mentally challenged in this nation.

We all know this story to some degree or other. And the real issue here is in the end we have a nation where guns are readily available and a growing population of unsupported, mentally challenged folks. Put the two together and we get Sandy Hook. Incidents like that happen more and more frequently and we all know in our guts what the pieces are that create the climate for these things to happen.

There has been an ongoing cry for gun control in this nation for years now yet we still see nothing but a stone wall greeting us.

We have fought for adequate health care and have started to get some shifts there but still see mental health as the big piece left out, that no one wants to talk about.

Yes, it is easier to think that Sandy Hook is just another anomaly, and not a symptom. But think that, brushing it off as just another one of those deals, we risk becoming dangerously complacent.

Our inability to deal with guns, violence, and mental health is no longer something we can ignore. We now have another 20 dead children to bury in this longstanding fissure in our nation.

We owe it to them, to our own children, grandchildren, to ourselves, to get beyond our national impotence to take on these longstanding and complicated issues. It is time, in the name of Christmas, to say NO to the power of money, of lobbyists, and social mythologies and YES to the children, to our families, to life!

I'm sure there are those of you who have struggled long and hard in this arena and only have the tears and sweat to show. You ask, like I do, how do we move forward in correcting this longstanding and seemingly intractable fissure in our nation?

We can change things but none of us can do it by ourselves. We must find a way to work together in a comprehensive and effective way. First and foremost, we need to step forward and say: This is enough, it has got to change!

I keep coming back to a quote from Joanna Macy:

"Is it my imagination to think that we have been chosen [to live] at a time when the stakes are really high, at a time when everything we've ever learned about interconnectedness, about trust, about courage, can be put to the test. Each one of us is a gift...the earth is giving to

itself. Every anguish, betrayal, disappointment can help prepare us for the work of healing...If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is greater than their fear, people who can open to the web of life that called us into being..."

That is us and we can make the difference, change the path ahead. May this Christmas be the beginning of a real change and not just a memory of a shattered season. If there is any Christmas gift we can give to one another, to our nation, it is this: We must get a handle on guns, and we must take the hands of those who are lost and frightened and work to help them find peace and safety. May our combined hands create a new Christmas story that will bring peace and good will back into our land once again.

Amen.