

(3rd Sunday in Lent)

John 18:1-27

“Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?’”

This past Friday, McFarland High School held an “Intruder Drill”. This was not their first nor will it be their last one.

Like McFarland, our Cambridge schools and schools around the country, also have these drills now.

Similar to the Nuclear Bomb “Duck and Cover” drills during the height of Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis, these “Intruder Drills” are the new norm. *Based on the feedback we received from the students and supported by a recent article in The Atlantic magazine, these drills are having a deep impact on the psychological and emotional health of our students.*

Intruder Drills are meant to “teach” students and staff how to respond if there is an “active shooter” in the building. *(Side note, as I am writing this sermon, there is an active shooter on the campus of Central Michigan University.)*

As you know, there are some politicians and people call to arm teachers with guns. *Wisconsin Rep. Jesse Kremer (R. 59th - Kettle Moraine) continues to introduce bills that would allow anyone to carry a loaded gun in school. Cambridge’s State Representative (Joel Kleefisch) and State Senator (Scott Fitzgerald) have both been supportive of these types of bills.*

Schools are not alone in struggling to address the growing epidemic of gun violence and mass shootings. In response to the Sutherland Springs Baptist Church shooting where 26 parishioners (including children) were killed and 20 others wounded, some churches have hired armed guards. Others have members who own volunteering bring their own guns and stand guard at the doors. Some are even doing “Active Shooter Drills” as a part of worship.

This is the new reality that we have created for ourselves. Actually, it is the most recent scenario around violence.

Violence has been a part of our human history including the larger Church’s story. If you are really interested in the history of violence and religion, I would recommend to you, Karen Armstrong’s book, **“Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence.”**

How are we, as followers of Jesus, called to respond to these acts of violence?

Before we answer that, we need to reflect on how Jesus responded to violence.

Each of the Gospels record the events of Jesus arrest in the Garden, though they differ in their accounts of what took place.

All 4 of the Gospels tell us that in response to the armed guards of the authorities arresting Jesus, a disciple of Jesus, reacts to the threat by drawing his sword, attacking a guard, and cutting off his ear.

John's Gospel is the only one to name this Disciple. It is Peter.

So we know that at least one of the disciples of Jesus was armed and willing to use it to cause harm in Jesus' name.

I suppose Jesus could have condoned this act of violence in response to the armed threat against him.

Jesus could have said to Peter: "A good person with a sword can always stop a bad person with a sword."

So how did Jesus respond? In John's Gospel, we know Jesus said to Peter, **"Put your sword back in its sheath."**

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus responds to this violent act with these words: **"Put your sword back in its place...for all who live by the sword will die by the sword."** (26:22).

In Mark's account, Jesus says: **"Am I leading a rebellion...that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?"** (14:48)

In response to the act of violence that causes physical harm to another person, in addition to saying, "No more of this!", Jesus does something we need to pay attention to as his followers. He touches the person wounded by the violent act, and heals him.

When confronted with armed forces, carrying out a threat against a loved one, Peter's (or an unnamed disciple) first reaction is to draw his weapon and attack, causing physical pain and suffering.

In that same threatening situation, Jesus, responds with a call to end the violence, and an act of love that leads to healing.

"Put your sword back in its sheath." (John)

“Put away your sword, for all who live by the sword will die by it.” (Matthew)

“No more of this!” (Luke)

If Jesus used social media, I wonder if he might have added the hashtags - #ViolenceIsNotTheAnswer #LoveNotHurt #HealNotHarm or maybe borrowing from the students of Douglas Stoneman High School - #EnoughisEnough and #NeverAgain.

Rev. Meda Stemper, a Presbyterian minister, and author of **“Performing Love: Entering the Future Through the Ending of John”** says of Jesus’ non-violent response to Peter’s violent reaction **“Violence is easier than testimony.”** She adds: **“The nonviolent resistance of love expressed in testimony is vulnerable and courageous.”**

Is violence easier than testifying to the non-violent response of love that brings healing and hope? Is it easier to hate another than to love them as Jesus loved us? Is it easier to do harm and hurt others in response to threats of violence against us or the ones we love?

“Violence begets violence.” Hate begets hate. Fear begets fear. Killing only leads to more killing, even when we believe we are justified in doing so, sometimes even in God’s name.

Jesus did not command his disciples to arm themselves with more swords in response to violence and injustice against him. His commandment was to love, to heal, to forgive, and be compassionate towards one another, even their enemies.

Remembering Jesus’ new commandment to love as he loved others, what do you think Jesus would say about the call by some to arm ourselves in churches, in schools, in our homes and society with more guns in response to the very real threats of violence in our society?

In discussing Peter’s violent reaction and Jesus’ response to violence, a colleague of mine, Rev. Johanna Rehbaum said: **“Love is awfully hard to live out when we feel threatened, isn't it? It's definitely not my go-to in the face of fear!”**

She makes a very good point. Sure we are disciples of Christ, who want to be faithful followers of Jesus, living out his command to love one another as he loved us, but seriously, Jesus, if someone with a gun threatened your loved ones, our children, wouldn’t you want to stop them first?

I have had many discussions around this very topic. But Jesus, when threatened with personal violence by armed guards, still chose the way of non-violent suffering love that led to his own death.

Peter, who chose the way of violence, causing harm to another in Jesus' defense, eventually, came to understand the way of Christ's non-violent, suffering love. He too would find his life on the line, and would not give in to violence again even when faced with his own death.

Being followers of Christ is not easy. It is not for the timid and weak. It demands much of us, well beyond coming to church on a Sunday morning. Living out Christ's command to love is challenging. It is risky. It is costly. Hatred and violence are so much easier to do than engaging in non-violent, loving acts of compassion and healing.

Joe Kay, writing in Sojourners magazine (sojo.net February 28, 2018) offers us this reminder: **"We're not Christian soldiers; we're agents of love, healing, and reconciliation. We put our faith in the transformative power of grace, not the destructive power of guns. We follow the non-violent ways of One who has already conquered the world without wielding a sword or firing a shot. And we can too — as long as we put our faith in the right place."**

So let me ask you, what do you, as followers of Jesus, put your faith in?