

Questions for Peacemakers
Deuteronomy 21: 1-9
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
October 5, 2008

Because of academics and football Virginia Tech has always had a high level of name recognition. But today, Virginia Tech is a household word, not only in the state, but around the world. Today, when "Virginia Tech" is mentioned overseas, people do not think of football or academics. They shake their heads in disbelief over the 33 persons who died so needlessly on April 16, 2007. The world's peoples are puzzled because the US which leads the world in so many areas is the only developed nation which permits such easy access to guns, and as a consequence endures such an astronomical level of gun deaths.

The Scripture for today is part of a law code from ancient Israel which addresses the problem of an unsolved murder. It probably would be ignored in many societies, but not in Israel. Israel believed that this unsolved crime polluted both the land and its people. The text is strange to us, particularly the liturgy with the young heifer. But, even so, these ancient words give us insight on how peacemakers are to take responsibility for purifying their lands and communities after there has been a murder.

Our lands and communities are defiled by 80 gun deaths every day and 30,000 deaths every year. To refresh our memories: Over 4,100 American servicemen and women have been killed in these five years of war in Iraq. But guns kill 5,000 Americans on our own streets every two months. And consider this: Between 1963, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated and 1992, more Americans were killed by guns in our own country in peacetime, than all US military personnel killed in all our wars of the 20th Century.

If that astounding statistic causes you to say, "Oh, that can't be true." "That's impossible." Then you have really heard it. If you say, "I need to check his facts," please do and let the truth sink in.

Our land is defiled because an idol called "gun rights" reigns. The idol will continue to reign until the day the American people deliberately examine how they have been deceived and decide they have had enough deaths. It has been said that unawareness is the root of all evil. You should be aware that those who holler the loudest about "gun rights" and the Second Amendment do not really believe in the Second Amendment. I say that because the second amendment assumes that there will be a "*well-regulated militia*." Even Justice Scalia is an advocate for a well-regulated individual right.

But, think. How many times have you heard the NRA praise our forebears for inserting the words "a well-regulated militia" into our Second Amendment? The word "regulation" has been anathema for decades in America and only in the last couple weeks have we come to understand that our grandchildren must pay a huge bill because our leaders have permitted large segments of our economy to go unregulated. In a congregation which is

certain to have some economists I dare not say that lax regulations fully explain our financial crisis, but at least we know they are a large part of the picture. We seem to have forgotten that a primary emphasis in our constitution is checks and balances. We have also ignored Holy Scripture which teaches that human beings are naturally self-serving. Human beings need regulation *because* we are human beings.

For 33 years I have seen the powerful gun lobby consistently lie to the American people and Congress in order to stop any proposed regulation on guns. They work very hard to promote a totally *unregulated right for guns*. When they can't reach that goal, they work tirelessly on behalf of a *poorly regulated militia* with loophole after loophole after loophole in our laws which are legion. **The thing the NRA fears the most is the Second Amendment's assumption that the country will in fact have a "well-regulated militia, whether that is interpreted as an individual or a collective right.**

Because human beings are sinful; get angry; are prone to revenge; at times are impulsive and violent; can get mentally sick; and make mistakes, people frequently turn to guns to solve human problems. We need fair and realistic regulations on instruments of death, just as we need regulations on our automobiles.

But let's see what the ancients did when there was an unsolved murder in their area. All the elders and judges from the surrounding villages rushed to the scene of the crime. They measured the distance from the body to their town limits and the nearest village was responsible to purify the land and wash away the sins of the people because someone was getting away with murder.

They were to act quickly and remove the guilt which everyone shared because this murder happened on their watch. I'm certain many questioned such a law. Surely someone complained, "This isn't fair. It's not my fault this guy was killed way out there in the country." I'm not answerable for that." But the priests and Levites said, "Oh, yes, you are. You are an Israelite and bear responsibility for this crime just as we do. We are in this together and each of us must pay the price!"

Understand that the last thing I want to do is to try and lay a guilt trip on you. You don't need that. You don't deserve that and I really don't have the strength to pull that off although I know some preachers who are good at that. You don't get that in this church and you won't get it from me. One of my heroes in the faith was William Sloane Coffin who said, "The problem with guilt is that it is such a convenient substitute for responsibility. It is so much easier to beat your breast than to stick your neck out." What I'm hoping for today is to see some Presbyterian necks stick out as an indication that you will work to stop the insanity of gun violence in Southwest Virginia and throughout America. Behold the turtle: It cannot move an inch without sticking his neck out. And friends, neither can Peacemakers. Neither can the church.

No one believes the leaders and citizens of Blacksburg and the University are guilty for the terrible crimes that took place 1½ years ago. But because this tragedy

happened here in this place, you good people have an enormous responsibility and an enormous opportunity to bring health, healing, and hope not only to this community, but to our entire nation.

You have a compelling story to tell; your whole community has been violated; you have some outrage that needs expression; you know existentially about pain; you know in here what needs to happen to have peace in a community. And by the grace of God, you can make your pain redemptive. As a Pastor I always tried to give comfort to my parishioners who were struggling with cancer. It didn't take me long, however, to discover that cancer survivors were far better counselors and comforters than I. So I began to put them in touch with one another.

A Blacksburg address is the only credential you need to counsel for peace. You have earned your right to speak with authority on the utter insanity of Virginia's gun laws. You have experienced more of the hell of gun violence than any other community in America. Do you think the Lord Jesus Christ wants you to be as quiet as a church mouse about how easy it is *for anyone* to get the most efficient handgun in Blacksburg.

Friends, I am not talking just to those who have a Rev. or a Dr. in front of their names, or to the religious pros in this place. I'm not speaking primarily to those who have a Ph.D. or an LL.D, or some other combination of letters after their names. I'm speaking to each of you. Don't you dare think there is nothing you can do to stop the madness. That is an insult to God. God has peace work that only you can do.

It seems to me that your first task as a peacemaker is to ask a lot of questions. You've heard there's no such thing as a dumb question. I beg to differ. My Mother, who taught in the public schools, was giving me a few pointers as I entered Jr. High. "Jim, show your teachers you're really interested in learning. Ask them questions. They'll be impressed." I got the message and was off to school determined to show my teachers I was eager to learn. The first class was Mathematics and Mr. Miller gave us an overview of the course. "We will have regular six-weeks tests," he advised. I raised my hand, "Yes, Jimmy, what is it?" Here was my chance to show how eager I was to learn, "Mr. Miller, how often will these six-weeks tests be?" He very graciously said, "Jimmy, you think about that a while." - - Actually, I've been thinking about it for 60 years.

Rudyard Kipling knew the value of good questions. He said, "I keep six honest serving men. They taught me all I knew. Their names are what and why and when and where and how and who. For a year and a half you have asked these questions. And you've received answers to most of them. You know about the what and when and where and who. Such answers are clear and precise. But, two questions from Kipling's famous list remain. They are the questions of why and how.

Long ago people asked, "Why was this man killed in the open country?" But, nobody could answer because they couldn't find the killer. There was only speculation. Having worked to prevent gun violence for 33 years, I can testify that everybody in this

movement is continually asking “Why, why, why in God’s name do we let it happen?” Why do we permit it? It seems that we are asking why more often these days. How many times have you asked why in the last year and a half? But, you don’t get many good answers, do you? You too are left with speculation.

No one here has the wisdom to explain evil or why Cho Seung Hui went on his rampage. All we really have is speculation that he was part of a minority, an outsider, a loner with deep anger and resentment inside, and we do know that he was terribly sick. We only have partial answers.

But, there is one more question and it is the most relevant of all: The question is, “how.” How were these people killed? The answer is simple. With a gun, of course. . . a very efficient gun. Cho Seung Hui, an angry, mentally ill, young man bought one of the world’s most efficient killing machines and he used it for the purpose for which it was created. That’s how.

Isn’t it ironic that the answer to how is so clear. But even so, our political leaders are so anxious that we not talk about it. They are skillful in avoiding the question *how*; as in how easy it is for anyone, to get a gun of choice, anywhere, at anytime in Virginia. And especially at one of our state’s 50 gun shows where thousands of guns are exchanged with no questions asked by unlicensed sellers. And the idol of gun rights is happy about that.

Our lawmakers do come to scenes of tragedy as they came to Blacksburg and they tell us they share our grief and will pray for us. And then they are gone. While we appreciate their sympathy and their prayers, but more than their prayers what we really need from them is some regulations which would make it far more difficult for troubled and dangerous people to buy efficient killing machines. This is a matter of life and death and I hope many of you will call your State Senator, John Edwards and insist that he change his vote for no new regulations to support a regulation for a background check on the purchase of *every* gun sold in Virginia. That should be no big deal for it takes no more than five minutes. That is not too large a burden to bear. Again, I say, no one has more clout on this than you people of Blacksburg.

God’s people have been tiptoeing for far too long on this issue. It’s time that we really started loving people as our Savior commanded us. It is real Christian love that will overcome this evil. Love is the weapon God has given us to defeat the idols of death and destruction. It takes courage to love. Someone said, “The Devil is in the details.” Well, so is God in the details.” Without a profound love for people expressed in the form of realistic regulations on the buying and selling of guns, other Virginia Techs will occur again and again and other communities will have to take another run through the questions of who, what, when, where, why, and hope to God that somewhere some group of people will have the guts to insist that their lawmakers sit down and have an honest dialogue about how people are being killed with such disturbing regularity.

As we love and work so that others do not experience the heartache we have known, we will find our healing. It's a crazy kind of logic, but it's the gospel. And without God, you'll never understand it. Agape, self-giving, sacrificial love which speaks up and speaks out on behalf of others will make our own pain redemptive. That's what we hear Jesus say to us as we come to His table, "This is my body, broken for you. This is the blood of the New Covenant poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Take it; eat it and drink it, in remembrance of me." Amen.