



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Leading Us Out Of Violence**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**July 22, 2012**

What sad and sickening news we all heard on Friday morning, another mass killing in Colorado. Another person armed to the teeth and filled with a desire to kill indiscriminately. More families shredded by violence. The commentary has taken the usual ideological positions. Will this be the event that leads to a change in gun laws? Why was no one in the theater armed and ready to take out the gunman? This is because we took prayer out of school. What kind of gun would Jesus buy? None of this will make the slightest difference.

However, I saw one thoughtful entry in the discussion. Michael Shank is the Vice President of the Institute of Economics and Peace, and he pointed out focusing on the weapons used is futile if we don't look beneath the event and into the underlying context. The Institute gathers information from sources like the FBI, Department of Justice, Center for Disease Control and others. They have used the data to rank states and cities for rates of violence and its cost. He says, "States that are more peaceful have higher education levels, higher health-insured rates, lower poverty and inequality, better access to basic services, higher labor participation rates, and higher rates of social capital (i.e. volunteerism, community involvement, perceived trust, group membership, etc.). The states and cities that are the most violent are the ones in which people are the most frustrated and desperate. As much as I don't like guns, blaming the assault rifles gets us nowhere. They are merely symptoms of a great dis-ease. If we are tired of the way things are then it is time to do something different.

In our readings today, Jesus is a healer and a shepherd. We need both. Jesus healed by the power of his ability to see people from God's perspective, as whole and healthy, unencumbered by any distortion of their humanity. Jesus could look at a leper and see only healthy smooth skin. He could look at a blind man and see only one with sight, see only eyes that take in the beauty of the world because that was what they are for. In Jesus' reality, everything is as it should be. Jesus could look at bleeding wounds and see only wholeness and strength, at lives cut short and see them continue. He could look at a disturbed, violent man and see a gentle soul capable of caring for others. He sees us as we are meant to be, not as we have become. He healed the ones who believed that they could be made whole.

The Lord is my shepherd, I have all that I need. He would lead me beside the waters of peace. He would show me the path of goodness and walk it with me. We need to be led out of the deep and disturbing valley of shadows and violence and fear. The problem is that I'm not sure that are convinced of that. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They cried out for their burdens to be eased and the lash to be stilled but they didn't think big enough to ask for

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org)

203-488-2681

*e-mail* [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



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freedom; that was God's idea. We are slaves to a sick culture and we don't know that we could be free. Can we imagine trying to be the kind of people that Jesus sees when he looks at us? Can we imagine sacrificing things we cherish for the good of others? Could we try giving up what the world says we need in order to find satisfaction and contentment and even joy?

It took some flashy special effects to get the Israelites on board. Ten plagues and the Passover, parting the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud to lead them by day and an awesome pillar of fire at night, water from a rock, manna from heaven, engraved tablets of stone. And in between, the people complained and missed the comforts of their lives in slavery. Would that be us?

We are led by something less glamorous, a little too close to home. It is the sight of the victim of violence hanging on a cross, with his life spilled out to the sounds of mockery. How do we follow that? Do we really want what that would mean for us?

We would love for Jesus to be here and to look at our sick society and see it as one of his lepers and just fix it. But I fear that he expects more of us. As I said last week, God's grace is not coercive. We will not be forced into freedom. We must want it. We must accept that we are not free and be willing to follow the one sent to lead us.

I could stand here and suggest that we begin a letter writing campaign to our elected representatives to enact some laws, to address the inequality, to actually live up to the Declaration of Independence, that creed that created this nation. That would certainly be one option.

I could suggest that we begin prayer vigils for peace in our communities and our world. And I do. The power of prayer is needed more than ever. But I believe that we are also called to something more. We are called to live according to his teachings and to let ourselves be led to a place that we have heretofore only prayed about – the kingdom come on earth.

To follow our shepherd is to begin to lead radically different lives. It requires us to examine carefully every aspect of who we are, what we do, and what we think. Jesus has told us what life in God's kingdom is like. It is filled with people who love and care for others. We all already do that in some measure but usually only to the extent that it doesn't cost us too much. What if we really sacrificed to help people who are on the wrong end of income inequality?

I heard of someone the other day who turned down a raise, saying "I don't need more right now; give it to those who do?" This radical suggestion was met with confusion. Let us confuse people regularly. Instead of asking "what's in it for me" ask "how can I give to others." What if we opened a spare room to someone who might otherwise have no place to lay their head? That's a brave move. Then we can work together to build more places that widows and single parents can afford.

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Jesus would lead us into the kingdom, where no one is an outcast. What do we have to let go of to see the Christ in all people and work for the dignity of each one.

Jesus kept things simple but we busy ourselves nearly to death. Stop for a bit and ask yourself what is really important to me? What are my priorities? Then look at how you spend your time and your treasure. If what you identify as important is not reflected in your calendar and your budget, make some changes. Give your time and your treasure to the things of the kingdom. Do so with courage and self-giving love.

All of these pieces of the world to which Jesus would lead us are the tapestry of true community, the community of people and the community of all creation. We are all one in the cosmic Christ, the unifier of all things. As such we hear and feel the cries and grief of our brothers and sisters in Aurora, the town named for the dawn but now mired in the shadow of death. For them and for all suffering communities, let us in those wonderful words of the Declaration of Independence, dedicate our lives, our treasure and our sacred honor, to being a part of the world made new, God's kingdom here and now.

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