

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

An excerpted reading from the Second Letter to Timothy, the first chapter.

*To Timothy, my beloved child:*

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*I am grateful to God . . . when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, . . . For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you . . .; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

*Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, . . . But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. . . Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.*

*2 Timothy 1:2-12,14*

Peace be with you!

You are each in my thoughts and prayers these days in the wake of the mass shooting in Orlando where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, predominantly young and of Latin American decent, were targeted leaving fifty dead, over fifty hospitalized and much of the nation traumatized.

These actions of terror stir up in us anger, and rightfully so! Especially, as we face the sad truth that there have been 1,000 mass shootings in the United States since twenty children were shot by a man with a gun at Sandy Hook in 2012.

These actions of terror, enacted by one, stir up in us fear, and understandably so! The tide of violence continues to rise closer and closer to the places we trust to be safe and to the people we love. When we are afraid and angry we tend to act from our instinctive reactions of fight, flight or freeze. Let us not react from our animal nature. Let us not hide or react out of fear nor let us employ violence in thought, speech or action; as Timothy reminds us, “*for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*” Let us claim these gifts of God given to us!

Therefore friends, let us take courage and look closely at the larger picture. This most recent act of terror, enacted by one, was not only the action of one. In fact, it was enabled by thousands of people and dare I say, even us. Were this a lone incident I could not say this. However, the fact remains that there have been over 1,000 mass shootings in the US since 2012! This is outrageous, shameful, and unacceptable. What is at the root of this? I certainly do not have all of the answers to this question but I have some ideas I am convinced are at its core.

Have you heard someone make a joke or a derogatory comment towards another person and just let it pass? Maybe it was aimed at a group of marginalized people or directed toward that family member or acquaintance who behaves uniquely. Sadly, I know that I have “let it pass.” Do you cheer, especially in a serious political debate, when one candidate slaps the other down with a witty quip? Again, I know I have cheered. Sure it’s entertaining, but is it really helpful in the larger discourse? When we have allowed these kinds of attacks to become the norm, we have helped to pave the way for massacres such as the one that occurred this weekend. Why? Because we have contributed to a culture that does not honor and respect all people. Let us vow this day to live into Luther’s explanation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “. . . Instead, let us come to our neighbor’s defense, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

Have you advocated or participated in conversations, debates, activities and competitive events where the most important thing is coming out on top? I know I have. Even after the 1,000<sup>th</sup> mass shooting since 2012, we have already begun to hear the same phrases, quips, and witticisms that folks with this or that ideological position use to push back

the ideas, thoughts and arguments of the other. The problem is that we have become a people who are all about winning; we have to have it all or nothing. (I think that is behavior is really all about fear; if we do not get our way we believe we will be unsafe.) When we participate in this type of culture we have again helped to pave the way for people to feel deeply left out, marginalized and angry. Let us vow this day to live into Luther's explanation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "We are to reverence and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs."

Have you used the actions of a small group of individuals to be the determining factor that defines the whole of the larger group to which they belong? Shamefully, I have been guilty of this. Just as we do not want the actions and attitudes of the West Borough Baptist Church to be attributed to us as Jesus' disciples here, so let us not link the actions of this weekend's gunman to that of the whole Muslim community. This is why I stand by our continuing to display our congregation's road sign, "Ramadan Kareem, to our Muslim friends," even with some derogatory comments we've received from members of the community. *Ramadan Kareem* is an expression meaning, "May you have a generous Ramadan." We must continue to build relationships with our neighbors. Let us vow this day to live into the second greatest commandment affirmed by our Lord Jesus, "To love our neighbor as ourselves."

Have you held to ideological positions about guns rather than explore greater understanding of other's thoughts? Have you been able to have conversations with others about guns without falling into the script of using position statements and slogans? I know I have done this. I know this is hard because it comes so close to concerns for our safety. What have you done to learn more about gun violence and the ways you can help curb it? Let us vow this day to learn one thing today how you can stop gun violence.

We MUST address gun violence! Therefore, as outlined above, we must address how we treat our neighbors. Are our thoughts, speech and actions ones that are self-serving or do they seek a common life and understanding? Do we allow ourselves to even tacitly participate or witness violent conversations about or towards others? Let us vow to not stand idly by. Let us not react through violence in thought, speech or action. When we witness someone behaving in such a way a possible intervention could be, "I do not think this type of speech (or attitude) is very helpful for the greater good we all want."

As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we are called, with a holy calling to live the way of peace, the way of wholeness that is shown forth to us in the Gospels, Acts and the Letter's of the Apostles. This way of our Lord is narrow and difficult AND it is the way that we as Jesus' disciples are called to follow.

Saint Isaac of Syria in the 7<sup>th</sup> century wrote: "Rebuke no one, criticize not one, not even those who live very wickedly. Spread your robe over those who fall into sin, each and every one, and shield them. And if you cannot take the fault on yourself and accept punishment in their place, do not destroy their character." These are strong words yet they are rooted deeply in The Way of the Good News to which our Lord Jesus calls us. Therefore, let us vow this day to pray every day that the Holy Spirit would *rekindle the gift of God that is within us, the spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*

May the Prince of Peace stand with us.

Serving Christ with you,

Pastor Brett  
From Sabbatical